

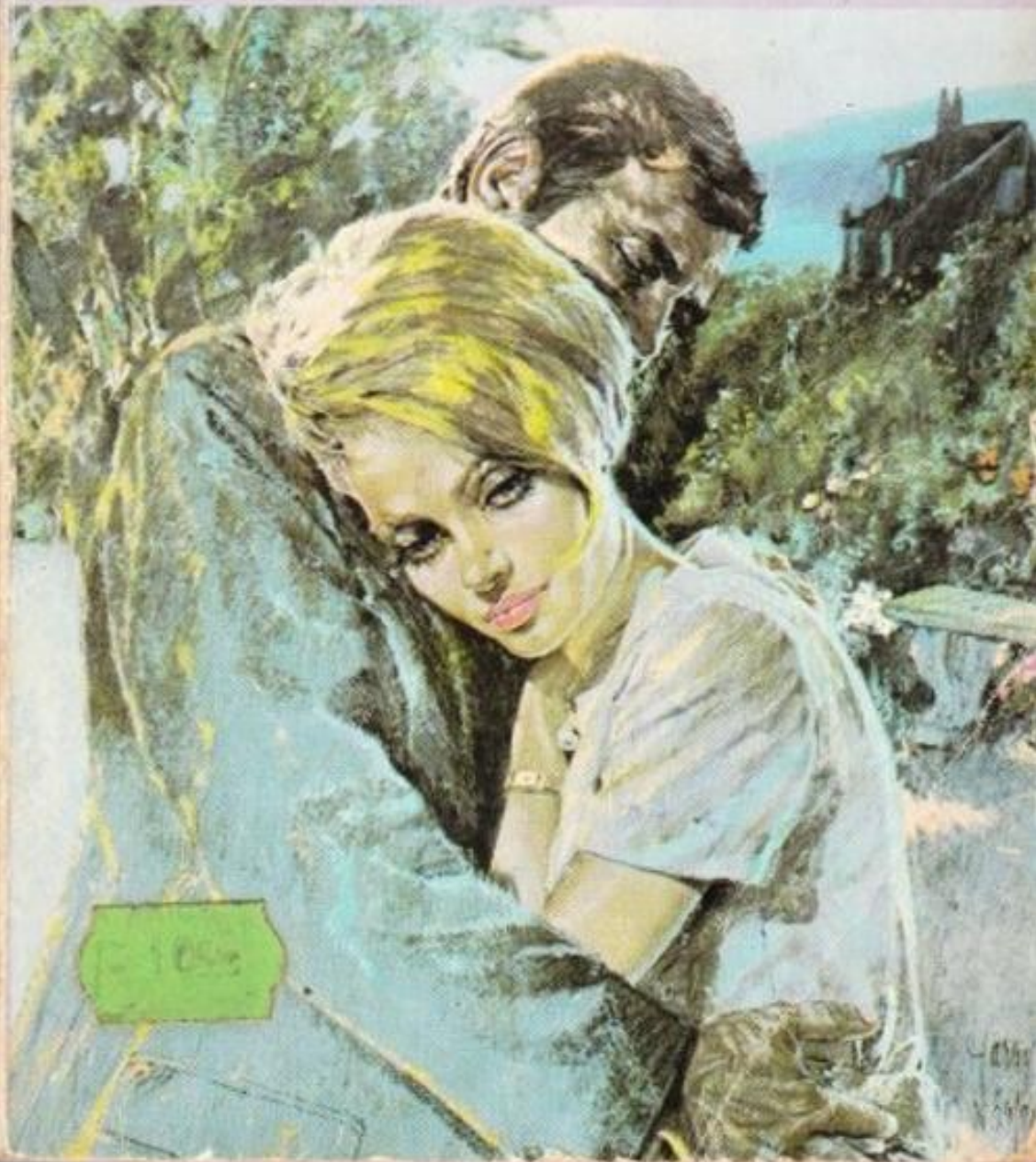


**Mills & Boon**

488

**COME  
BLOSSOM—COME  
MY LOVE**

**Essie Summers**



# COME BLOSSOM-TIME, MY LOVE

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## Essie Summers

The inheritance of the fruit farm in Central Otago meant a way out for Jeannie Fraser – an escape for her young brother and sister and herself from dependence on their mean and cruel stepfather. Now they were free – ! Or were they? Would their stepfather let the children go? Jeannie took no chances and virtually abducted them.

Soon they were all happily settled at Strathlachan, and Jeannie even found her initial dislike for the manager, Fergus MacGregor, beginning to turn to the very opposite. But always there was the fear that their stepfather would track them down. Yet it was not their stepfather who found them, but the beautiful, unscrupulous Cecily Chalmers, who knew all about Jeannie's past – and was quite prepared to use it as a threat to win Fergus for herself. . . .

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I've travelled the world twice over. Met the famous: saints and sinners,  
Poets and artists, kings and queens, Old stars and hopeful beginners, I've  
been where no-one's been before, Learned secrets from writers and cooks  
All with one library ticket To the wonderful world of books.

### COME BLOSSOM-TIME, MY LOVE

Few of us would object to being left a flourishing New Zealand fruit farm,  
but to Jeannie Fraser it was a specially providential happening. With only the  
one drawback; she disliked and distrusted the indispensable manager.

**I**T was a glad golden and blue morning in New Zealand, but Jeannie Fraser, sitting staring out of the bus window at the breathtaking beauty of Auckland Harbour, might just as well have been looking out on some bleak, grim landscape.

She was wondering what it would be like to sit and anticipate lovely pleasant things such as most girls did. Things like new, exciting dresses and hairdos, a debonair escort for the evening outing, going down to one of the bays for a swim with the family . . . not to have any worries nagging at the back of her mind . . . wondering how long it would be before small, sturdy Teresa revolted openly against her stepfather's tyranny, his meanness . . . wondering how long it would be before Peter broke down under the strain of it all.

Because Peter was showing signs of cracking now. Teresa had her own way of letting off steam. Peter hadn't. Peter would stand it just so long, then—Jeannie didn't know what lay beyond that "then". Perhaps he would run away. Jeannie felt the old familiar nausea at the dreaded thought. A boy of fifteen, untrained, his schooling unfinished, vulnerable, hurt already in the core of his being through living with anyone as crude, as cruel, as mean as Bertram Skimmington.

Where would he go? How? Jeannie of late had felt relief every single morning when she went in to waken Peter to find him still in his bed. She was sure he was plotting flight.

Teresa's spirit didn't bruise as easily and she got rid of it in her own way. The glimmer of a smile lit the back of Jeannie's eyes for a moment. She felt in her pocket and brought out the crumpled piece of paper she had found under Teresa's pillow that morning when she was hastily making the bed. She smoothed it out now and read it again:

"Skimmington by name, Skimmington by nature, Stepfather Skimmington's just a skim-milk creature! He counts the grains of sugar, he counts the leaves of tea, I wish some kindly giant would kill him off for me."

Jeannie's smile faded. It wasn't really funny for a child of nine to wish somebody dead. Peter had never wished his stepfather dead ... not aloud, that was. Jeannie shivered a little as she remembered the look in Peter's eyes last night when Mr. Skimmington had turned his back after that merciless baiting. Remembered Peter's young fist clenching and unclenching.

It was not the sort of problem that could be solved by thinking about it, either. Jeannie had an idea that had she had the means to keep her brother and sister, the law might allow her to take them from Mr. Skimmington's guardianship, but though her salary would have kept herself in a flat quite adequately, it certainly wouldn't keep three.

If only, if only Mother hadn't married him. Poor, foolish, vacillating Mother. Their existence in Fiji after Daddy had died had been precarious enough, but happy and free from tension. But Mother hadn't been the sort to bear the burden of a family alone, and when Bertram Skimmington, wealthy Auckland businessman, holidaying in the Pacific and seemingly open-handed, had proposed to her, she had accepted, drugging her conscience with the thought that, like a heroine in a Victorian novel, she was sacrificing herself for her children's sakes.

Poor Fay Fraser... she had paid over and over again in bitter coinage for the way she had betrayed what marriage should be.

Dying, she had said to Jeannie, sitting by her bed, "I'm leaving you to reap the consequences ... the sins of the *mothers*, my darling! I can't see away out. But, Jeannie, you won't let Bertram drive you away, will you? You'll stay by Peter and Teresa? And perhaps when Peter is able to support himself you could find a little flat for the three of you.

"Jeannie, there's one thing I managed to do ... Bertram doesn't know. You mustn't let him guess. I scraped and scratched to save a little from the pittance he gave me for housekeeping ... as soon as I knew I had leukaemia. It's not much. ... just a little over two hundred pounds. I sold my first engagement ring too. It's in the little Post Office around the corner in your name. It's there, my love, in case things get too bad for the three of you ... something to see you through.

"Please forgive me, please don't think too badly of me. You won't, I know. Your nature is stronger than mine. You'd never have got your life into a snarl



like this. You are stronger, finer. More like your father. I was always foolish. But if Ian knows, he'll realize I've paid in full for what I did to him."

Ian? Jeannie thought her mother must be wandering a little, perhaps delving into some foolishness of her girlhood. She had fallen into a deep sleep then, the sleep from which there was no earthly waking, and Jeannie had been left to carry on.

It had taken all her grit to swallow the constant humiliations Bertram heaped upon her, sometimes taking the line of least resistance, foreign to her nature, but it meant that his wrath did not fall, frustrated, on Peter and Teresa.

It had taken every penny of what was left out of her wages after she paid her stepfather her board to keep the children even meagrely clothed. He kept them in food, that was all, and denied them every comfort, every pleasure, forever thrusting their dependence upon him down their throats.

Jeannie thought that if she hadn't loved her work life would indeed have been unbearable; but at Owen Chalmers & Co., Ltd., the work was exacting though satisfying, and so absorbing that Jeannie just had to shed her personal problems the moment she stepped through the big swing doors.

This morning, stepping off the bus into the tide of work-intent people on the pavement, she mentally neatened herself for the day ahead. She must start on that filing cabinet right away, check on those carbons.

What a wonderful thing that work here was so free from personal complications, from drama and heartbreak ... Jeannie came to her desk, calm, unruffled, efficient, neat.

Neat but never glamorous. There was never any money left for glamour. Good job Mr. Chalmers didn't look, as so many men in his position did, for up-to-the-minute smartness. His standards were solid, lasting, the reverse of cheap.

Strange then that he should have fallen for "Sweet Cecily". That was the office nickname for Owen's second wife, with a sarcastic and meaning inflection on the "sweet", seeing through the veneer of charm and beauty to the malice and shallowness beneath. It must have been a lapse on his part, almost a temporary eclipse of his usual judgement. So they had thought when

he returned from a trip to Britain with Cecily, a New Zealander he had met in England.

The office life slipped into its well-oiled routine and the orderly procedure banished to the dark corners of Jeannie's mind her own problems.

Until the afternoon.

Just as she resumed her seat after the lunch hour her telephone rang. Owen Chalmers himself.

"Oh, Miss Fraser, I'll be delayed. I've a man coming to see me in a quarter of an hour. Tell him I'll be held up. Car trouble. Ran out here to see my cousin at one o'clock and some stupid bounder let his car run back down the hill and has damaged my left front wing so badly the mudguard is bent into the tyre and she won't budge. No, no ... no one hurt. I was in it, but it took the other side. But it's a plaguey nuisance. We've got to wait for the police to apportion the blame, etc., and I'll take a taxi after that.

"This fellow can wait in your office. Oh, and would you get the Ravensbourne papers out of my desk and take a copy. Right-hand top drawer, right on top. If you could have them ready for me after I've seen this man it would help immensely. Thank you, Miss Fraser."

Jeannie put back the receiver, stepped across the office, opened the door of Mr. Chalmers' private office and without warning was confronted with a situation that took her breath away . . . Cecily Chalmers, tall, blonde, locked in the arms of a man Jeannie had never before seen. She was clinging to him in an utter abandon of feeling that made Jeannie feel slightly sick. Not because she was a prude, but . . . this was a business office, not a movie screen, and . . . this was Owen Chalmers' wife!

Cecily's back was to Jeannie, but the man was tall and broad and his eyes looked directly into her shocked ones. He was furious—no doubt about that—but he should also have looked guilty. He didn't. That was queer, in fact he looked relieved.

In a flash Jeannie understood. When the door had swung open he had thought it was Owen. Her lip curled.

Cecily's back lost its curve as something in the stillness of the man she was clinging to forced her to the realization that something was wrong. The man's arms dropped to his sides, so did hers. She turned round.

Jeannie was vaguely aware that the look in Cecily's eyes was odd too. Yes, they held fury too, but more malice and frustration than guilt. The fury came to the top.

"Is it not usual, Miss Fraser, for you to knock on the door of my husband's office?"

Jeannie's hazel-green eyes held Cecily's topaz ones steadily. "It *is* usual," she said, "if Mr. Chalmers is here, but—" her gaze flickered scornfully over the two of them— "it's very evident he isn't!"

Cecily's eyes narrowed to slits. "Miss Fraser, are you daring to criticize my conduct?"

"Yes," said Jeannie simply.

Cecily's breath escaped her in a hiss that sounded faintly sinister.

"You're insolent, Miss Fraser. I shouldn't advise you to adopt that tone to me. One word from me to my husband and you would find yourself outside the door."

Jeannie was surprised how calm her voice sounded. It even held a little hint of amusement.

"Oh, come, Mrs. Chalmers, surely you're not as naive as that—or expect me to be either! The boot's on the other foot. One word from *me* to your husband and *you* might find yourself outside the door."

She lifted her chin, her gaze level. "I don't like using threats, but occasionally one has to use the same weapons as one's opponent—however one feels it lowers oneself. I have no patience ever, when reading who dunnits, with people who allow themselves to be blackmailed, and your threat did amount to just that. My job is very important to me. I have dependants. Also I admire and respect Mr. Chalmers. I wouldn't like him to be more disillusioned than he is already . . . then he must be. I suggest we tidy up this little scene. Your husband has been delayed with car trouble. He just phoned me. He instructed me to get some papers for copying and he is expecting a client to see him at any moment."

Before Cecily, livid with fury, could reply to this, the man spoke.

"I'm the client. Where would you like me to wait?"

It took Jeannie by surprise. Finally she said, "In *my office*, not here."

She held open the door, very much mistress of the situation.



Cecily turned to the man with a lightning change of expression.

"Darling, let me —"

Jeannie supposed his grim expression was due to the fact that he had been caught in a compromising situation.

He said, "Cecily, we'll stick to the—er— plan I outlined a few moments ago. I shall see your husband *alone*."

Jeannie felt physically sick. What were they plotting? What shock was in store for Mr. Chalmers?

The man gestured towards the door. "After you, Cecily," he said punctiliously. Mrs. Chalmers hesitated, then moved to the door and through it, casting not one glance in Jeannie's direction.

Jeannie's own gesture sent the man out before her. She hoped it emphasized the fact that he had no right in Owen Chalmers' inner sanctum. She crossed to Owen's desk, took out the Ravensbourne papers with fingers that were beginning to tremble, and followed the man into her own office.

She indicated a chromium-armed chair. "Will you wait there, please?"

With schooled courtesy she placed a smoker's companion within his reach, put a box of cigarettes nearby, the "Weekly News," the morning paper.

"Thank you," he said, a hint of irony in his tone. Their eyes met.

Jeannie spoke on impulse. "When Mr. Chalmers rang me he had just had a slight accident with his car. He said he wasn't hurt, but he must be shaken up. He has a bad heart. I do hope he's not to have a further shock this afternoon."

There! She'd said it. Her words could not now be recalled and she would have no regrets.. .

The stranger's eyes were hard, his lips tight. He even contrived to look righteously angry.

"You may be Mr. Chalmers' confidential secretary, but my business with him is entirely of a personal nature."

Her eyes were sombre. "I rather gathered that. That was exactly what I meant. I do hope—"

His voice was controlled, but he was obviously holding himself in check despite the fact that he was in the grip of strong emotion.

"Miss . . . well, whatever your name is ... I refuse to be discussing this with you when your employer comes in. Beyond telling you that Mr. Chalmers is in no danger of shock from me, I must ask you not to exceed your position. In short, to mind your own business! And let me warn you that when I'm talking to Mr. Chalmers, if I as much as hear that typewriter stop for a single minute, I shall ask him if it's possible we have an eavesdropper!"

As that struck home Jeannie whitened. What she would have said in reply she did not know, for at that moment the door came open and Owen Chalmers walked in.

He nodded to Jeannie, said, "Oh, glad you could make it," to the man who a quarter of an hour before had been making love to his wife, and ushered him into the sanctum.

Jeannie typed loudly and as if her life depended upon it, doing the last page three times so there was no pause in the typing.

As she heard them coming out she stood up, pulled the sheets out and went out of the room with them, unwilling to be caught taking even a surreptitious glance at Owen Chalmers' face.

No, today's workaday hours hadn't been quite the respite from personal problems and drama she had imagined it would be.

Owen Chalmers was definitely not himself after his visitor had left. He was thoughtful, abstracted, though not looking like a man who has had a mortal blow. As a man might who might just have been told his wife was in love with someone else, or had been asked for a divorce.

Jeannie told herself she was imaginative; there might be nothing like that in the situation. Her lip curled. Much more like Cecily Chalmers to want to have her cake and eat it too ... to be the spoiled wife of a very rich man and to have fun and games on the side!

Altogether it was quite a day .. . half an hour before closing time Owen Chalmers took a couple of tablets, confessed he had a shocking headache, and that he was going to call it a day.

He said, "Perhaps the accident shook me up more than it should have. Age, I expect. Can't take it now."

Jeannie thought with compassion that it might not have been the accident so much as the interview that followed it.

He continued, "You can leave too now, Miss Fraser. I guess it isn't always easy for you to go home each night to cook the dinner for your family. But don't forget to collect your pay packet as you go out." He smiled at the mystified look on Jeannie's face. "You're getting a rise. One you well deserve. This is in appreciation of an attitude I appreciate—you always go the extra mile." And he was gone.

Jeannie sat on at her desk a moment or two blinking back tears. It had been so unexpected and it would mean so much. Little treats for Peter and Teresa. She wouldn't dare tell Teresa, of course—Tess simply couldn't keep a secret. She meant to be discreet, always, but inevitably blabbed. Teresa would merely think Jeannie had squeezed the money out of the housekeeping and rejoice unashamedly in the fact that Mr. Skimmington was being done brown.

She would certainly tell Peter, it might give him the gleam of hope he so sadly needed ... the feeling that in the future their prospects might be brighter. She would give him part of the rise as pocket- money. That would enable him to stand treat at the school tuck-shop for his mates. Peter was too sensitive to take their "shouts" when he couldn't return the kindnesses. And perhaps he could subscribe to a motor magazine as long as he hid them.

Trash, Mr. Skimmington always said. Sheer waste of money! Peter pored over the motor magazines in Whitcombe's always, but longed to subscribe regularly as so many of his friends did. He longed for a camera too, but that would be risky. Hard to hide.

Jeannie's heart was certainly lighter going home than when she had set out this morning. She hoped it was a happy omen; that Mr. Skimmington would be in one of his rare moods, hoped that no one had upset him at the factory today.

She sat in the bus beside an elderly man who was totally absorbed in his paper and decided to take a surreptitious look at the amount of her rise. She'd subtract it, anyway, to give her stepfather no cause to suspect she had had an increase. The pay envelope certainly felt fat... it couldn't be as large an increase as that, though. She slit it, peered in. There was another

envelope enclosed. She slit that quickly, feeling an unusual flutter in the pulses.

A cheque. A cheque for fifty pounds, and with it a card in her employer's writing. "A small bonus, Miss Fraser, with much appreciation for your unflagging work just after the fire we had."

Once more Jeannie had to blink away the tears. It was so long since pleasant surprises had come her way. And this—this meant more than her employer dreamed. Here was the rise to ease the burden of her stepfather's meanness, and the bonus to add to the bank account her mother had started for her. That would mean that if ever there was an emergency as far as Peter was concerned she would have a little money to help him. And she was half an hour early. An extra half- hour to be alone with the children.

But only Teresa was home. Not playing, as usual, or getting the potatoes peeled, but lying on her bed, flushed and coughing. Jeannie's heart contracted. Of late that cough of Teresa's had been most persistent. She had asked Mr. Skimmington about halibut pills and extra oranges, but he had only snarled at her, saying all those fads were ridiculous newfangled nonsense and that if the child only ate more rice and sago and all the other stick-to-your-ribs things he'd been brought up on, she would not be so puny.

Jeannie had bought what she could herself, carefully wrapping up the orange peel before putting it in the garbage tin and concealing the tablets. But sometimes the money wouldn't stretch to many.

Teresa was so sturdy in spirit, so frail in body. In fact sometimes Jeannie thought her spirit would wear her body out.

Tess's small pointed face lit up at sight of her sister home early. Jeannie persuaded her to go to bed, filled a hot-water bottle, slipped along to the corner store for some lemons, made her a drink

"Peter's late, isn't he, Tess?"

"Oh, it's the last day of their military training, Jeannie, remember? They're doing manoeuvres in one of the parks. He said he might be late."

Jeannie remembered. At Peter's day school they got the military training over in the first few weeks of the school year rather than have it cut into one day a week throughout term. Then they settled down into classes.

Peter had done remarkably well at school, considering he had known so many changes. He was the youngest in his class, he wouldn't be fifteen for another month, and would sit for his O-levels in November. He wanted to be a draughtsman, having inherited artistic ability from his father, but intended turning it to a surer way of making a living than by the precarious freelance painting.

Jeannie had a half-formed dread at the back of her mind that her stepfather might not allow him to go to University. But if Peter won a bursary and found casual work during the vacations, surely he would permit it! If only she could persuade Peter not to show how keen he was on the idea it might help. She herself would cunningly stress the financial return it would bring eventually.

Soon she heard the click of the gate that meant Peter was home and on the heels of it the less welcome one that signalled Mr. Skimmington.

Jeannie looked out of the window to see her stepfather coming up the path, the evening paper under his arm, his mouth set in its usual grim line, his protruding frog-like eyes as unpleasant as ever. How could Mother ever have—?

Jeannie left Teresa's room and hastened out to the kitchen to make sure everything was in order, that she couldn't be accused of wasting fuel, or burning anything.

Her stepfather's eyes swept the table. Three places set and a tray.

"That puny little wretch isn't in bed again, is she?"

Jeannie swallowed. "She is, Mr. Skimmington. She has a very feverish cold. I thought it better to get her straight to bed."

"Pampered child. Plain ridiculous. When I was a child I was as tough as a nut. Always went barefoot, never knew what it was to be in bed with a cold."

Jeannie saw Peter's face flush with anger. Peter never spoke up for himself. He had lost heart. He did for Tessa sometimes.

She said hastily, "She was running a temperature. I thought it wiser to reduce it if possible so she can be left tomorrow."

"Temperature!" he snorted. "Trouble with you women, once you possess a thermometer you get the dithers every time somebody's temperature is

slightly above normal. My mother brought up ten children in the bush without a thermometer. Didn't call a doctor in every time, either."

Jeannie said, "And lost three of them. One with pneumonia. Which she thought was a heavy cold."

Mr. Skimmington's face flushed unbecomingly. "Don't be impertinent. A thermometer and lifted a lid, peered in. "You've been far too lavish with the onions in the mince. .. What do you think I am—A millionaire?"

Peter laughed as if he couldn't help it. "Millionaires don't live on mince and onions." His stepfather measured glances at him. "Well, charity brats have to, that's certain. I deny myself luxuries to keep you, and you aren't even grateful."

Jeannie said hurriedly, "Have you noticed the report of the welfare committee in the paper? They've reported it in full."

She had become adept at introducing red herrings in the last few years, trying to avoid open clashes between Peter and his stepfather.

Bertram picked up the paper, opened it and said unpleasantly to the boy, "Oh, well, this is the last day of that military nonsense, I suppose. And we older folk can rest in our beds o' nights knowing we'll be well defended if attacked. All your little rifles against an atom bomb, eh?"

Jeannie shook her head at Peter to warn him not to reply. She said, "Peter, perhaps you'd like to change out of your uniform now." Better to get out of it and risk no more sarcasm from Mr. Skimmington.

Her stepfather lifted his head again. "He can leave it on. The Government pays for that—saves wear and tear on what I pay for."

Peter said sullenly, "Jeannie paid for my new trousers and pullovers."

Jeannie held her breath. For remarks like that Mr. Skimmington had been known to strike Peter, but since Christmas, when she had had a long talk with her brother, begging him not to antagonize his stepfather so much, there hadn't been quite so many scenes, Peter enduring the taunts with only a whitening of his face to betray his resentment.

But it had done something to Peter, had driven it underground, and was destroying his spirit. But she dreaded physical violence because Mr.

Skimmington didn't realize that in build Peter was almost a man and might turn on him.

The dread of that went with Jeannie night and day. Her imagination pictured Peter turning on his stepfather with all the force of youthful desperation ... striking harder than he knew. She could picture Peter in the dock for it. ...

But this time Bertram only said, "I hardly supposed you would get into your new things. I did pay for your others. And after tea you can spend an hour chopping wood."

Jeannie felt relief. Chopping wood was one way of working off feelings.

The meal got over in an uncomfortable silence broken only by perfunctory remarks. By nature all the Frasers were chatterboxes, but in the presence of their stepfather conversation dried up.

Jeannie broke a long spell of silence. "I suppose by tomorrow they'll get you all sorted out into classes and settle down to work, Peter."

"Yes. They'll do that first thing. Hope I'm in the top class."

"I think you're bound to be, judging by your report at the end of the year."

Mr. Skimmington looked up. "Don't be too sure of it," he sneered.

Jeannie felt silence was the only thing, but she didn't like the way Mr. Skimmington smiled to himself over his tapioca ... hateful, horrible tapioca, made with half water, half milk.

She got up and went for Teresa's tray. The little girl had eaten very little and she was bathed in perspiration. Of course the night was hot, a stifling, February night, with all of Auckland's tropical humidity. They ought to have had a cold salad, fruit with ice cream. But it would cool down soon.

Jeannie sponged her, administered aspirin, and in the bedroom, with an eye on the door, peeled an orange and fed it to Tess in segments.

As she came out of the room with the thermometer her stepfather passed her on his way to the sitting-room. That was one thing about summer, he sat up there and left them in the kitchen. He was with them all winter because he wouldn't light another fire, and the coal range was always on for the evening meal, though never allowed to be replenished once the dinner was cooked.

Bertram smiled. His smiles were actually a degree less pleasant than his scowls.



"Well, what is her temperature? Ninety- nine, I suppose?"

"No, Mr. Skimmington. A hundred and two."

"Well, that's scarcely at death's door."

"No, but sufficiently alarming. She must stay in bed till it goes down."

A snort was the only reply.

Jeannie didn't get much sleep. Small Teresa was restless and tossed from side to side. Jeannie sponged her frequently and gave her glucose and fruit juice, moving quietly so her stepfather had no complaints about being disturbed.

Next morning the child was sufficiently distressed to warrant Jeannie asking might she stay home.

Bertram rounded on her. He was furious, accusing her once more of pampering the child, of being lazy, wanting a day off.

Jeannie said, "But it wouldn't mean loss of money to *you*—only that *I'd* be a little short."

"Comes to the same thing. It would mean I'd have to buy something for the children that otherwise you would. I pay for far too much as it is. Besides, it's the principle. You're all spoiled brats. . . lazy and good for nothing. But what would you expect ... a frivolous, useless mother and an artist who was too lazy to get a decent job to keep himself going."

Jeannie had damped down the fires of her wrath often enough to avoid unpleasant repercussions, but she would not hear her father insulted.

"My father was a good artist... He was making a fair living, was said to be a coming man, when he died. I know we're rather in the nature of thorns in your side, Mr. Skimmington. Perhaps you would prefer it if we did leave and supported ourselves."

The frog-like eyes surveyed her with reptilian cunning. "Oh, I couldn't allow that . . . My reputation would suffer. The children are my responsibility since I married their mother. But I often realize I would be better off without *you*. A daily woman coming in wouldn't have so disturbing an effect on them. I would have complete authority over them."

Nausea rolled over Jeannie. Then she rallied. "Of course," she said, "you would then have to clothe them completely."

Bertram's eyes narrowed. He understood all the moves.

"But it might be cheap at the price—to rid my house of an unwelcome presence. Now—time we were off to work. Teresa can stay in bed and get up and get herself a snack at lunchtime."

Jeannie, her eyes blinded with tears, went to get ready. She got Peter off before she left. She didn't want him left with his stepfather.

They walked to the corner together.

Peter said, "Sis, what can we do? Tess isn't fit to be left. Do you think you could give me the bus fare and I'll rush home at dinner-time and see how she is. I mean, she ought to have the doctor. And she needs someone home all day. If only Mum—"

He turned his head away as his voice broke, unwilling that his sister should see his tears.

To his surprise her voice was quite gay. "It's all right, Peter. I'm not getting the bus. I'm walking on past the bus stop and round the block, and as soon as I see Bertram getting on the next bus I'll go back to see to Tess. I just daren't call a doctor. I would if I could be certain he'd get here this morning, but you know how it is—he might not arrive till tea time and be caught in the act by Bertram. But I'll get the chemist to make up something.

"And, Peter, here's ten shillings. Spend it how you like. I've got a rise. But for heaven's sake don't tell Tess. You know what she is. But you can order your motor magazine at Whitcombe's if you like. Only whatever happens, keep it at school."

As she watched Peter walk away from her with a brisker step and a brighter eye, Jeannie felt grateful beyond measure for a good employer.

The look of delight on Teresa's face as she returned made Jeannie realize how the little girl had been dreading the long day on her own. Jeannie administered a dose of fruit juice, and re-made her bed, brushed her tousled tawny hair. She took her temperature again. Still high.

"In a little while, pet, I'm going to steam you some fish, make a nice white sauce with it, with lashings of parsley, and I'm going to make a tiny trifle for pudding. I bought a wee piece of sponge, and some ice cream."

Teresa's eyes were like saucers. Jeannie felt a pang. It was not right that so small a treat should mean so much. Jeannie thought of her own childhood,

with Daddy and Mummy so young and gay, the birthday parties, the lovely toys, the fun and freedom.

Teresa's voice said, "I wish Peter could have some."

Jeannie laughed. "He's going one better, darling. He's having fish and chips at the school tuck-shop. I gave him the money."

"Gee, Jeannie, could you really spare it? Have you been left a fortune?"

Jeannie laughed. It would never do to tell Teresa she had had a rise. She'd only have to get mad with her stepfather to blurt it out.

"Oh, nobody's going to leave us a fortune, pet. We've no relatives, wealthy or otherwise. But things will get better as you and Peter grow up."

Jeannie felt quite lighthearted as she washed the sheets and pillowcase from the child's bed, prepared the early lunch, opening the windows to let the odour of fish escape so that Bertram's nose with its slightly flaring nostrils shouldn't detect the extravagance and wonder when she had cooked it.

By twelve-thirty Teresa's temperature was down to a hundred. At ten to one the phone rang. Jeannie went towards it, changed her mind, rushed to Teresa. It just could be Bertram. She grabbed dressing-gown and slippers.

"Quick, Tess, answer that phone. If it's your stepfather don't let on I'm home."

It was Peter. Teresa scrambled back into bed.

Peter's voice was hard, desperate. He was evidently trying not to break down.

Jeannie couldn't believe what she heard. Bertram had been in the day before to see the Head. The Head had sent for Peter this morning and told him, as gently as possible, that his stepfather had made it quite plain that as soon as Peter turned fifteen in March, he was to leave school and start earning. Fifteen was the school-leaving age.

Peter told it baldly, in jerks.

Jeannie couldn't take it in.

"But, Peter, what does he want you to do? It's so short-sighted. Even if he didn't let you go on to university, it's still wiser to let a boy get his O-levels. You get a much larger commencing salary from any firm."

There was a pause in which Jeannie could hear Peter swallowing.

Then:

"It isn't just *any* firm, Sis. It's Skimming- ton's. *The pickle factory!* With Miser Bertram all day. Not even in the office. He told the Head that I'm to learn the business from the lowest rung up . . . I'm to start in the peeling department."

As a rule Jeannie schooled her feelings in front of Peter and Teresa, but this time discipline failed her. Her voice broke.

"Peter—oh, no. He mustn't—he couldn't—"

Peter's voice then, despairing, but with a note of hopeless resignation in it that Jeannie found unbearable.

"But he can ... and he will, Jeannie."

Jeannie said all she could, knowing that her words were only like babies' fists beating against castle walls. She couldn't reach Peter to comfort him. He had closed his heart against comforting. He hadn't rung hoping she might be able to do something. He had just rung to tell her rather than have to tell her in front of Bertram.

Jeannie came away from the phone, glad that Teresa had shut her door when she had gone back to bed. She went out to the kitchen, and stared out unseeingly at the back garden, beyond tears.

Peter—with his artist's hands and his aspirations—in the peeling department of a pickle factory! Peter surrounded by the confidence-destroying company of his stepfather all day, sneered at and humiliated constantly in the presence of others. The only thing that had made life endurable for the boy was that he loved his school, the hours he spent out of Bertram Skimming- ton's house. And if the Headmaster hadn't been able to persuade Bertram to let Peter stay on, she, Jeannie, would not be able to.

Jeannie couldn't bring herself to go into Teresa's room just yet. She mustn't let her own sense of despair envelop the child. It was unhappiness that was undermining Teresa's health as it was.

She walked down the front path, forced herself to pick a rose here and there, some forget-me-nots, so that if Teresa looked out she would not wonder why her sister was pacing the paths.

Her eye alighted on the letter-box. She hadn't collected the mail. Not that there would be anything but the usual window- envelopes, a few business notices for Bertram. There was rarely anything for the Frasers.

There was quite a bundle and Jeannie didn't sort them till she was back in the kitchen. For goodness' sake, there was one for her Miss Leslie Jean Fraser. It was postmarked Dunedin. A business envelope, with a solicitor's address on the bottom corner. And a "Please return if not delivered" marked heavily upon it.

Jeannie's heart gave a leap, then subsided. Don't be silly, Jeannie Fraser. Miracles don't happen . . . you've often prayed for something to deliver the three of you from the Skimmington clutches. It's never come—why should it now?

She slit it open, scanned the contents, dropped it on the table and, breath coming unevenly, flopped on the nearest chair.

Then she read it again. It was true. Gloriously, blessedly true. Just imagine—after all these years. Her godmother, long neglected by Fay Skimmington, who had been careless about answering letters or keeping in touch, had left her the Central Otago fruit orchard she had owned. It was a paying concern, beautifully looked after by the manager who had run it in Mrs. Kelvington's last years, the solicitor said.

They had spent months trying to trace her, but now, seemingly, they had found the legatee. Their inquiries had taken them to Fiji and back. They would need legal proof, of course, of her identity; her parents' marriage certificate, her own birth certificate. Endless details were touched upon.

He believed that as a child she had once stayed three months with her godmother, so no doubt she remembered the old homestead, quite a modest one. Since then a small, modern residence had been built on the farm for the manager. Perhaps from her own memories it would seem a small orchard, one that had little more than paid its own way then, but more land had been acquired, quarters for the seasonal workers added, and with air transport fruit orcharding was a paying business these days.

They would be very glad if she would contact them immediately—in person if possible. Air travel would be quick and easy and any expense she would be put to would, naturally, be reimbursed out of the estate. Also any reasonable advance could be made once formalities were completed.

If a personal visit was impossible right away, perhaps she would contact them immediately by telephone, making the call collect, and they were hers faithfully, Gillingham, Renfrew and Smollet.

Jeannie's first impulse was to go crazy with joy. She wanted to rush into Teresa's room, dance madly, sing, yodel. But she couldn't, of course. For one thing Teresa wasn't well enough. For another she wasn't safe enough. Jeannie didn't want to tell Mr. Skimmington yet. Not till she was surer, not till she could tell him she could now support the children, take them away to a gloriously free and healthy life in wonderful Central Otago.

Jeannie closed her eyes, thinking of the rugged outlines of the tawny hills of Central, cutting like jagged cardboard against hot, blazing blue skies . . . orchards afoam with bridal blossom, fruit hanging red from the boughs . . . the air like wine, the winters with curling and skating, terrifically cold but wonderfully bracing, just what young Teresa wanted.

There would be a District High School near for Peter, or, if she thought it advisable, he could even go as a boarder to Otago Boys' High School in Dunedin where his own father had been educated. Money wouldn't matter. They would have a home of their own. . . free of Mr. Skimmington's temper, his moods, his mental cruelty, his cheeseparing ways.

If he let the children go... It was just as if a giant hand clutched Jeannie's heart and squeezed it. *If*. It wasn't that he in any way liked the company of the children, but he had that sadistic streak in him that loved power, dominion. It satisfied something in his warped nature to thwart and frustrate them.

Suddenly Jeannie was sure beyond shadow of doubting that Bertram would never let them go. That somehow he would contrive to prevent them. In a moment of sheer panic she felt sure Bertram would even work it so that he would be made trustee of her money ... in some way he would get his miser's hands on it.

Then, on the wings of inspiration, came The Plan. Why tell him? Why try to battle against his probably unshakable guardianship of the children .. . why not just go? Could they? Jeannie's racing brain assured her that they could. And then, given time to prove she had a suitable house, and an adequate income, perhaps if Bertram Skimmington did have them traced she would be

able to prove she could support the children, that they were happier and healthier.

Because otherwise it would be difficult. Bertram was cunning. He felt it good policy to subscribe heavily to local charities . . . provided, of course, that his name appeared in the newspapers. Few people would suspect his private meanness. He liked to pose as a champion of good causes, as a man interested in local affairs. He had his enemies, true, but what business man didn't?

Jeannie's thoughts were like lightning, devising, rejecting, approving, wondering how practicable her plans were. Because her need was so great, so urgent in the case of Peter . . . and almost as urgent for Teresa, who could so easily develop a lung weakness if this state of affairs continued, her plans grew apace. Yes... it could be done, it must be done.

Marvelling at her own outward calmness, Jeannie went into the sickroom, sponged Teresa, brushed her hair, gave her an orange and glucose drink and, drawing the blinds, tucked her down.

"I've got to go out for a few moments, dear. I want to get some oranges and lemons for you. I'll get you some of those pink wafer biscuits you love . . . just lie and doze till I get back."

Her temperature was down to ninety- nine. Practically normal. Good. The child must be well before they travelled. Jeannie went to the local post office, asked for the call to be made urgent, and was through to Dunedin immediately.

Not till the solicitor's voice, calm and practical, gave her more details did she really feel the whole thing was true, that she hadn't just dreamed it up out of desperation. She had the marriage and birth certificates with her, a measure the solicitor seemed to approve. She read the details over the phone to him.

Jeannie explained nothing of her own situation, did not mention she had a younger brother and sister in her care. She simply said she would come to see them very soon. Possibly by the beginning of next week. She said, hoping it might not sound too odd, that she would make a request—that no letters be sent to her till she arrived in person.



There was a note of surprise in the solicitor's voice, but he resisted the curiosity he must have had. Perhaps the legatee of Mrs. Jean Kelvington was too good a client to be offended. He was painstakingly careful to assure her it was far from a fortune, but a comfortable income would be hers. He asked if he should send her an advance to pay her air fare down, but Jeannie hastily assured him it was not necessary. And repeated her request, that they did not contact her further till her arrival.

It was nearly four. Just time to draw out the nest-egg her mother had put aside for them; enough to see them over the journey. She had her fifty pounds bonus, another two hundred pounds should be enough.

She couldn't believe she had all that money in her possession. She must hide it carefully.

She was only home five minutes, and had a peep at Teresa sleeping peacefully, when Peter walked in. Peter with drooping shoulders and a tight withdrawn look in his eyes as of someone who sees prison walls closing in on him. It would have stabbed Jeannie cruelly had she not known that in half a dozen words she could dispel that look.

Jeannie was pouring water into the teapot and Peter was amazed to see, as she looked up, that she was radiant.

He stared. "Sis! What makes you look like that? Anyone would think you'd been left a fortune."

Stars in her eyes and warmth in her heart Jeannie said simply, "I have, I have. Oh, Peter, Peter! At least not a fortune, but a fruit farm in Central Otago. My godmother— you wouldn't remember her—Mrs. Kelvington. She's left me—us—a house and a thriving business. It's true, Peter. I got a solicitor's letter today. I rang him up. Oh, Peter, we can leave here. No pickle factory for you! You can go to Daddy's old school as a boarder if you like or to the District High. You can go on with the career you want."

Suddenly the tears were pouring down her face. She dashed them away, laughing at her own foolishness, and saw Peter had a strange look in his eye.

"It's no good, Sis," he said. "He'd never let me go. He wants someone to learn the business from the peeling up ... to carry on when he retires. He wouldn't—" His voice broke.

Jeannie caught him by the arm. "I realized that. Peter, we're going to run away. Listen. Teresa will be fit to travel by the end of the week. You can both—apparently— leave for school at the usual time, but return here half an hour after Mr. Skimmington catches his bus. So will I. We'll leave a note saying his treatment of us has driven us to go back to old friends. He'll think it's Fiji. If he starts enquiries it will be at the shipping office. There's a ship leaving Friday. He'll think we're on that under assumed names. We'll take a taxi to the wharves, then another back to the bus depot. We'll get a bus to some silly little insignificant place off the beaten track and stay at some country pub that night.

"If they suspect we haven't gone to Fiji they'll try the Land Liner bus or the Limited Express, perhaps even the planes to Wellington or the South Island, but if we dodge backwards and forward all over the North Island I'm sure we could disappear completely."

There was a look of hope, of conviction, dawning in Peter's eyes.

"I believe we could... but what if he puts the police on to us, could they bring us back?"

Jeannie said slowly, "I've thought of that, but you know what store he sets by public opinion. I think he'll keep it as quiet as possible. Besides, if he did, I would have the money to take it to court. He'd hate that. Maybe he'd rather let you and Teresa go than face publicly what I'd have to say. I can't prove physical cruelty, but it wouldn't sound too good if your headmaster testified that you had been denied your career to go into a pickle factory. But I'd much rather, if possible, disappear. Then if later he finds out where we are and the court can see you and Teresa are well cared for and happy they might not make an order for your return. I'd like to take a chance on it. Are you with me, Peter?"

"I'm with you," said Peter, and his shoulders straightened.

Jeannie knew she had sounded more optimistic than she was. But she must, so that Peter did not walk with fear. In truth, she was cold with dread

about the outcome. She might be putting herself on the wrong side of the law. But she was going to risk it.

"What about Tess, Jeannie? Won't she give the show away?"

"She certainly would. Nothing surer. She just mustn't be told. You can both leave for school together and she mustn't have an inkling. When you get to Tyson's corner, keep going. Take her into the Park, sit down on a seat and tell her and keep strolling about the Park till nine-thirty just in case Mr. Skimmington forgets something and calls back for it.

"I'm going to ring Mr. Chalmers tomorrow, explain that I have to stay home a few days with Teresa, and I'll get your books and other treasures away by taxi to a storehouse in the city. They may have to stay there for months before we dare send for them. It's either that, or leaving them here. I'll have to store them under an assumed name. Our flight may get into the papers, though I'm inclined to think not.

"I can only take the things Mr. Skimmington will not notice. I dare not risk much. And we'll take only the clothes I've paid for—none of his. We'll buy new. And it will help to travel light. And, Peter, you'll have to look fairly despondent when Bertram gets in and asks if the Head has told you you're leaving school next month. But don't overdo it. I mean I want no horrible scenes. And don't, whatever happens, let him suspect we're planning to run away."

Jeannie lived on the edge of her nerves for the next few days, afraid lest any unusual activity be remarked on to Mr. Skimmington by the neighbours, but there was little chance of it, for he prided himself on "keeping himself to himself"—whatever that might mean—and none of the people near liked him, though they never suspected how nasty he really was but merely put him down as sour and somehow repelling.

Jeannie knew she daren't take any suitcases . . . Bertram would say they had stolen them, but she bought some canvas grips at the Army Stores and smuggled them in.

Teresa enjoyed having her sister at home, thought the activity due to spring-cleaning and was threatened with dire punishment if she let out as much as a

hint that Jeannie had stayed home to nurse her. The child's face was thin and peaked beneath the tawny hair, but her temperature was staying at the normal level now, and once away from here she would soon fill out in the bracing Central Otago air, with good food and a happy home.

CAME Thursday morning, with Peter and Jeannie keyed up for the big adventure ahead. They had their usual porridge, but found it hard to swallow down. For a wonder Teresa managed all of hers. A good sign, Jeannie thought.

Peter set off for school with a casual goodbye to Jeannie in front of their stepfather, and with Teresa. As he went out of the door he looked back, caught his sister's eye and smiled guardedly.

Jeannie left before Bertram went along to the bus stop but turned round a side lane that twisted back to join the main road whence she could make quite sure he caught his usual bus. As she saw the hated figure climb on board she heaved a sigh of relief. She walked back to the house. If she met anyone she could say she had forgotten something.

She had written her farewell letter to Bertram the night before, it had met with Peter's approval. It sounded as if indeed they were going back to friends in Fiji, without being too pointed. It merely said they had realized they were being a real burden to their stepfather and were going where they would be welcome.

They hoped he would merely sneer at that, and think cynically no one would take in three folk with only one able to earn, and that they would probably soon be back. Either that, or that his enquiries would lead him into the Pacific area. Jeannie had added that if he tried to bring them back she would fight the case in court, and would reveal that Mr. Skimmington was blocking Peter's chosen career.

Peter came in with a Teresa he had obviously had to subdue. It would have been more in her nature to have rushed in shouting, but her eyes in her thin little face were enormous.

She spoke in a whisper, with a side look at Peter. "Is it really and truly true, Jeannie? We're going to run away? Like in a book? And never come back to Beastly Bertram again? And we've got a home of our own?"

Jeannie knelt down, put her arms around her. "All true, pet. But we've got to fly. And to go quietly. And don't talk in front of the taxi-man. Leave that to Peter and me. We're going to lay a false trail."

Peter looked at the note against the clock. Then his eye fell on the postscript. "Your dinner is in the big blue saucepan, Mr. Skimmington. Just heat it up. There is a cold pudding in the safe."

Peter whistled and looked at his sister with a new respect.

"*I'd have* put ground glass in it," he said.

They were away in half an hour. Jeannie had packed the canvas bags in the early hours when she was supposed to be sleeping. There was very little in them. There was more in hers, but some of the children's clothes had been bought by Mr. Skimming- ton and she was taking no risks by placing herself in a doubtful position. She was just taking a change for them. Soon, with a steady and adequate income, she would be able to buy them good clothes.

When they were finally away, with that old stickybeak Miss Rubeman passing at the time, Jeannie said distinctly to the taxi- driver, "Yes, the boat sails at eleven," they began to realize this was going to be fun. Teresa knelt on the back seat and poked out her tongue at the Skimmington residence. For once she went unreprimanded.

Jeannie paid off the taxi; the man wished them *bon voyage*; they waited till he was well away and then walked back to the shopping area nearest them. They had no real fears about meeting Mr. Skimmington, for the pickle factory was in one of the outer suburbs, but Jeannie didn't intend wasting much time in town just in case the horribly long arm of coincidence caught up with them.

She led them into an outfitter's and to their surprise she said, "We're going to have a new outfit each and wear it away."

They stared at her. Peter said, "But, Jeannie, where's the money coming from? You won't have had any from the solicitor yet?"

Her hazel-green eyes danced. "A bonus, my pets. All of fifty, pounds. Plus a little nest-egg Mother put away for us. Another two hundred. And when we get to Dunedin the solicitor will give us an advance. We can't buy anything too expensive now, but enough to make us look—and sound—

completely different. For instance, Peter in that school uniform would be identifiable anywhere.

"We'll start with him. Grey sports trousers, lemon pullover, and a sports coat."

Teresa said wistfully, "I suppose I wouldn't be allowed to get Black Watch tapered slacks and a duffel coat?"

Jeannie hesitated. The weather was warm. But Bertram had frowned on girls in shorts or slacks, and this would mark the end of reasonless domination very well. She said crisply, "Why not? If we got lightweight ones they'd be the very thing for travelling in. I'll get you a really nice print frock too—something suitable for wearing at hotels to dinner."

Teresa's eyes were like saucers. "Hotels! *Us!* Oooh, I've never stayed in a hotel in my whole life."

"Well, there'll be quite a lot of hotels, darling. We're going to zig-zag all over the North Island. Now, for heaven's sake, don't give anything away in front of the girl who serves us. Folk get curious so easily. No one must suspect we're on the run."

They accomplished this in what seemed an incredibly small space of time, and with the donning of sports clothes, his first, since Bertram had said school uniforms were enough for a boy growing so fast, Peter looked almost adult and suddenly confident. Jeannie slipped him a five-pound note.

"You can pay for our meals as we go, Peter. I'll attend to bus fares and so on. We'll go to a chemist's before we leave and buy you a small box camera so you can take snaps of all the places we visit." Peter had longed, without hope, for a camera, she knew. She added, before Peter could get his breath, "And when we get settled in Central, I think we'll go in for a colour camera and take slides. Makes a good hobby. Now let's go upstairs to the grill-room and get a good meal. Because goodness knows when we'll get our next."

Jeannie herself looked quite different in green tweeds with a hint of bronze, repeated in the blouse. For once she had bought what she wanted with no thought of serviceability. But she thought her bag and shoes must do till they reached Dunedin. She must not overspend.

She didn't want to run short, though she thought she had budgeted well. She didn't intend to curtail any pleasures the children might have en route,



for at the back of her mind was the thought that their freedom might be fleeting. She prayed it might not be so, but in case it was short she was going to give the children something to remember. And if Bertram did catch up with them she would fight back if at all possible to retain the care of her brother and sister.

They took a country bus to a quiet little township fifty miles away in the Waikato, had a meal at the country pub, caught another bus to a town on the east coast.

This journeying was a constant wonder to the children. This part of New Zealand was new to them and time flew. Jeannie booked them in at a quiet, cheap hotel on the sea-front, signed fictitious names in the register and put their address as Hamilton. She carefully used their true initial as second names.

"Then if we inadvertently call each other by our real names people will only think—if they think about it at all—that, as so many folk are, we're called by our second names."

They were terribly tired, especially Teresa, though Jeannie thought this due to excitement as much as anything. She put the little girl to bed early, then she and Peter went into his room next door to talk over their plans in more leisurely fashion than they had been able to do before.

The look of strain had gone from round the boy's young mouth, the veiled rebellion from his eyes. Jeannie's heart lifted, she was sure she had done the right thing now. She let him make suggestions, take some of the responsibility.

"How about going right across to the west coast tomorrow, Sis, to New Plymouth? Then down through Wanganui to Wellington?"

Jeannie thought that a splendid idea. "And in case Mr. Skimmington thinks we've gone south, though it's not likely, we'll go across the Straits to Picton in the Queen Charlotte Sounds and then down by rail-car to Christchurch. Spend a night there, and get the express to Dunedin. See the solicitor and go from there by bus, I suppose, to Strathlachan in Corriefield."

"What's it like, Strathlachan?"

"I was only ten when I was there, Peter. I was there for one whole lovely summer with Auntie Jean. She liked me to call her that. Uncle Hugh was

alive then too. They were pets. It's a real home. Sort of sprawling, with little porches and annexes stuck on everywhere. Lots of windows, all with pot-plants in them. It had belonged to Aunt Jean's mother, so is quite old. They had a large family and they added on bits and pieces as they needed it.

"Then they put on a bit upstairs, so it's a storey-and-a-half house with dormer windows in the roof, windows that look right out to the orchards and over the mighty Clutha to the mountains. There are heaps of bedrooms downstairs, so you and Teresa could have one of the dormers each as a hobby room. You could have your drawing-board there, Peter, and some photographic gear. I think there might be a skylight in one, at the far side."

Peter drew in a deep breath. "It sounds like paradise."

Jeannie suddenly clasped his hand. "Peter, I can scarcely believe it yet myself. There won't even be any financial worries. This manager is evidently a splendid fellow. The solicitor said so. He'll look after it all for us. I had those working holidays with the Benningtons in Hawke's Bay on their fruit orchard, so I know a bit about picking and packing, but this man will know the technical side. We're going to arrive bang in the busiest time."

"Well, even Teresa will be able to help after school, and so will I. I'd slave till all hours if need be, to be free of Mr. Skimmington—to stay on at school." He looked at his sister as a thought struck him. "Did it upset you, Jeannie, to have to leave Owen Chalmers like that?"

She dropped her eyes. "A little," she said. "I did hate not being able to be frank with him. I wrote him in the early hours this morning. He'll have had the letter this afternoon. I told him I was extremely sorry to leave without warning, that I valued his good opinion and hated to do this to him, but that my stepfather had made life unbearable for us all. That, in sheer desperation because I was so afraid I shouldn't be allowed to keep the children, I was keeping my destination a secret from everyone.

"I said I hoped in time to be able to prove I could maintain my brother and sister, but as I needed time for that, I could reveal to no one just where I was going or how I was able to do it. If he would say nothing to anyone, be prepared to seem as puzzled as anyone at my sudden disappearance, it would help immensely. That I was only telling him this much because he might worry otherwise. And I thanked him for his kindness to me as an employer."

Peter looked at her shrewdly. "That was the hardest thing of all to do—leave him in the lurch like that, wasn't it, Sis?"

She turned her head so Peter shouldn't see the flash of tears that came to her eyes. "But it had to be done. And it wasn't to be set against the glorious thought of being able to get away from that house of misery. Oh, Peter, isn't it wonderful? A home, an income, freedom. Now, off you get to bed. Travelling is tiring, and there's plenty ahead of us."

They came to Dunedin by the express on Tuesday, expecting by now to be somewhat satiated with scenery and travelling, but the incomparable coastline of Otago, the Scots Province of New Zealand, had held them entranced as the engine rounded the great bluffs of the harbour with the narrow channel marked out clearly, the hot sun steaming down on the sapphire bays across the water among the Peninsula hills.

"Gosh," said Peter, "I thought Dunedin would be dim and ghostly, wreathed in thick Scots mist . . . with grey mosses dripping from the trees and Mount Cargill and Mount Flagstaff with their heads in the clouds. But it's wonderful. Look at that bush, look at the sunlight on the sea, the multi-coloured houses on all the hills."

Jeannie laughed. "Dunedin can be grey and misty, and it does have a big rainfall," she admitted, "but its reputation for bad weather is like the report of Mark Twain's death ... grossly exaggerated. Besides, Dunedin's charm, like England's, is in its greenness, and you can't have that without rain." She chuckled again. "I've not been here since I was ten, but I'm an Otago Scot to the core. It's my birthplace, and to me Dunedin is the loveliest city in the Dominion. I *like* its weather. I think it's fun to go from sun-baked days and heat-waves to snow and ice. It's dramatic, satisfying."

They turned straight in at the Leviathan, still under assumed names, then at nine-thirty the next morning were in Dowling Street at the solicitor's.

He was most surprised to find Jeannie had a family with her. She was guarded about them, merely said, "We were all living together in Auckland. This will be a much better existence for them, right out in the country. I worked in an office there, but I'm quite happy to give that up now and live on the orchard."

She mentioned she had had some experience of fruit picking and packing.

The solicitor smiled at her. "Nice, of course, to feel not a complete novice at the game, but you will have no worries with Fergus MacGregor at the helm. Mrs. Kelvington was very fortunate to get him after her husband died. He's an indefatigable worker, knowledgeable, efficient, trustworthy."

He hesitated a little. "There's just one thing, Miss Fraser, er—"

"Yes?"

"It's essential for the good running of Strathlachan that you retain Mr. Mac- Gregor's services. Such men are hard to come by. I would advise you—if you will take such advice and not resent it—to go very carefully with him at first. He—er— isn't very happy about working for a woman."

Jeannie's eyebrows rose. "Why? Did he find my godmother difficult? I can't imagine it. Or did she perhaps become cantankerous with age?"

"No. He was absolutely devoted to your godmother. But then she was so much older. You are so young, just twenty-two. It makes the situation a little difficult. I'm sure you will appreciate the difference."

Jeannie's brows drew together. "I don't quite see how it makes it difficult. I'm not exactly likely to start throwing my weight about on the strength of two working holidays in Hawkes Bay."

"No, if you are tactful, I'm sure the situation will resolve itself. One other thing— this may help you understand. Mr. Mac- Gregor has worked long and hard to make the place pay. He—er—rather naturally, since neither Mrs. Kelvington nor her late husband had any relations to leave the property to, hoped he might have been able to buy it and to run it himself."

Jeannie digested this. From the solicitor's hesitation she deduced that the manager had probably expected to have it left to him.

"I see ... that would make a difficult situation. I'm sorry about that. But when I get things sorted out and we're settled down we may be able to find some arrangement that might suit us both."

Mr. Gillingham looked at her appreciatively. That sounded sensible. But he said

with native caution, "All in due time, of course, nothing must be rushed."

Everything had an unreal feeling to Jeannie. Could this be the Frasers? Owning property. . . getting a very substantial advance from the

solicitor . . . their very own money. Having him offer to arrange their transport to Corriefeld by the afternoon bus, asking might he give them dinner.

Jeannie turned that offer down. Better not let Teresa spend too long in this astute man's company. The legal mind might recoil in horror from such an escapade . . . running away, using false names making fictitious entries in hotel registers, removing two children from legal guardianship.

"We have quite a lot of shopping to do," she said hastily. "But thank you so much. The children need overalls and what-not because they hope to help after school and at the weekends right through the picking season. We may have something at a snack bar."

He smiled benignly on them. "And I suppose you want to explore Dunedin a little without an old fogey talking business tagging on? But don't tire yourselves out. After all, you'll be able to come to Dunedin quite often by car. Central folk do."

"By car?" asked Peter.

"Yes ... a nice little Volkswagen Mrs. Kelvington bought not long before she died. There is a truck too, and a station wagon for the business. Mr. MacGregor always drove her. He will drive for you, I expect. Or do you drive, Miss Fraser?"

She shook her head.

"Oh well, you'll soon learn. One does when young." He turned to Peter. "And so will you, I daresay. How old are you?"

Peter was almost speechless with delight. "I'm—I'm nearly fifteen. I know—in theory—how to drive, but I've never had the chance to learn, sir."

"Well, get MacGregor to teach you. Splendid opportunity . . . there are rough shingle tracks all round the property, plenty of rises for practising starting on the handbrake and so on before you venture on the road. You could start on the tractor. Gives you the feel of things. It would be a great help to your sister, and probably to the business too, if you could get your licence when you turn fifteen and drive car and truck and station wagon."

Peter was quite bemused as they walked away.

The bus journey to Strathlachan was beautiful, with the bus riding high above the bed of the Clutha, seen below as a green-blue ribbon. The scenery wasn't gentle, pretty scenery, it was on the grand scale, with hills tawny-gold after weeks without rain, and it made one wonder what the sheep found to eat; the hills looked so bare under the tussocks, and the very rock itself seemed to thrust upward through a thin crust, almost as if resenting being covered at all. There were great formations of schist rock and jagged outlines against the burning sky.

They swept through sleepy Lawrence, dreaming beneath its poplars, already showing a tiny tinge of gold. What did it dream of? Jeannie wondered ... the sixties ... the streets filled with rough, gold-hungry men, some lawless and violent . . . the brawls in the streets with every second property a hotel, the gaming dens, its Chinatown, the gold coaches with their escorts sweeping fearfully through gullies and gorges. . . . Some said there was still gold in the hills, and here and there to this day were smalltime prospectors who lived in lonely huts in the river gorges, washing grains of gold out of the creeks and dreaming of some day striking it rich as in those far-off days. Jeannie believed that what gold was left was too deep to be mined profitably.

Little had they thought then that the real and abiding wealth of Central Otago lay in blossom and fruit, that miles of blooming orchards would hide the scars on the hillsides and bring a new prosperity to the land.

The children loved it all, the piles of shale from those other days piled up all over the vast riverbed, bits of rusty dredges sticking through, the remains of dwellings, some merely caves fashioned into rough shelters, others sod huts, that had been so superior to canvas tents in the bitter winters. This part of New Zealand history was suddenly coming alive to them.

It was a scenic bus, with tourists, so all these things were relayed to them over a sound system, and they were taken up to the Roxburgh Hydro above the spillway to look down at the mighty torrents foaming down. It was the fourth fastest river in the world, they were told.

Then they were into the real orchard districts with tiny wayside stalls at every gate piled with cases of golden and rosy fruit, Peaches, apricots, apples, plums. In very few cases were people in charge of them. Some had padlocked money-boxes with slots in the top merely had ajar full of change,

with ten-shilling and dence that they had been well patronized. They were cleared often through the day, of course.

Mount Benger, without a tinge of snow, guarded the sunlit hills below him, coloured roofs gleamed out between symmetrical rows of trees, there was an air of prosperity and activity about all the properties. They came to Strathlachan in the long, southern twilight.

"It will last a long time here," said Jeannie. "Auckland is semi-tropical, so night falls much more suddenly, though not as suddenly as in Fiji. Southern twilight is wonderful, something you two have never known. Of course in winter the mornings are terribly dark. They have terrific frosts here."

Finally the driver pulled up at some new stone gates where a drive led into an old homestead surrounded by ornamental trees that gradually thinned into orchard land where, neatly divided off, were rows and rows of every kind of fruit tree.

Jeannie, remembering back to other years, realized the farm had been brought up to date most noticeably. There were the older trees, yes, but ruthlessly pruned now and brought into full bearing, and by the graded sizes of the trees you could see it was planned for years ahead.

The fences gleamed in new white paint, the hedges were clipped and close, the sheds and outhouses spick and span. The new house, the manager's, was set in a tiny garden close to the old homestead and was modern to a degree and very small. Perhaps they had no family.

The old homestead looked much as of yore and was shabby in a kindly way, painted a grey that faded gently and harmoniously into the great rocks of the hill behind it. The solicitor had told Jeannie that pending her arrival they had done little to it, feeling she might have her own ideas about modernizing it.

The bus driver put down their far from smart luggage, said with kindly curiosity, "Having a working holiday at Strathlachan?"



Jeannie hesitated. Better to be frank, for she remembered that in the country everyone knew everybody's business.

"No. Mrs. Kelvington was my godmother. She left it to me."

He whistled. "Gosh! You were born under a lucky star, weren't you? That should be a little goldmine. And to have Fergus MacGregor run it for you to boot! Best orchardist round here."

He touched his cap and clambered aboard his bus again, waved, and it lumbered off.

Jeannie wasn't keen about all the seasonal workers seeing their inadequate luggage, so she said, "Put most of the grips behind the cases in the wayside stall, Peter."

They set off up the drive, exclaiming with pleasure over all they saw. Only Jeannie knew any apprehension. The solicitor's words about the manager's frustration at not being able to purchase the property had disquieted her a little. However, when he saw she was not the sort to throw her weight around and was prepared to work on a bonus system, they would probably get on very amicably.

There were birches, walnuts, and poplars lining the drive, and they came up unperceived, though at times through the trees they glimpsed activity in orchards and packing-sheds.

They came into a cleared area of grassland, and there before them, fenced with white rail posts, was the homestead and manager's quarters. Farther off to the right were the packing-sheds, and beyond and above them on the hillside were neat rows of pickers' quarters, built as one long building with doors and windows opening on to a long verandah facing the sunny north.

As they clicked open the picket gate into the homestead garden they became aware that the sorters in the sheds had stopped, and most of them swung round.

One figure detached itself and came down the slope to meet them, broad, tall, square-shouldered, wearing a tartan shirt and khaki drill slacks.

Jeannie didn't want the children to sense any resentment, if resentment there was . . . they had felt unwanted too long. She said in a low voice to Peter:

"Go straight up to the homestead, will you, with Teresa? I'd like to interview Mr. MacGregor on my own."

She went on to meet him, smiling.

They came to a stop facing each other, each with a hand outstretched. Hands that suddenly fell to their owners' sides.

Jeannie felt the blood rush to her face, then suddenly leave it, her heart start beating twice as fast as usual.

*"You!"* she said.

His consternation certainly equalled hers.

They stood there, measuring glances. The last time that had happened had been in Owen Chalmers' office, across Cecily's golden head.

N

OW the man's jaw tightened. Possibly he sought for words. Jeannie found them first.

She gave a short laugh. "*So you're* the man my solicitor informed me was an indefatigable worker, knowledgeable, efficient . . . *trustworthy!*"

Her emphasis must have got him on the raw, but he looked at her with unfaltering hard blue eyes. And exhibited no shame, no confusion. His voice was not apologetic. It was curt, controlled, even had a wry amusement in it.

"Well, as long as I'm the first three, does it matter about the last?"

Jeannie's gaze was as level as his. But he had the advantage of her, being not only tall but standing on higher ground, but her voice did not falter.

"It matters most. I need a manager I can trust."

He maintained his even tone. "In all matters pertaining to the management of the estate you *can* trust me."

Jeannie's lip curled. "If not in matters of the—heart. How odd. I always imagined a person's integrity was a whole thing. I'd thought that anyone who regarded marriage laws as only something to be flouted might have very loose ideas on business matters."

His lips were a thin hard line. He was keeping a rein on his temper. She guessed, seeing there was the slightest hint of red in the chestnut of his hair, that he would have a quick temper.

But he said, without emotion, "There is a solution. You sack me and engage another manager."

Jeannie said, "Not at the moment."

Then his lip curled. "I see. Although you don't trust me you're fully aware of the difficulties involved in trying to secure someone else at this critical time of year."

"Naturally. That's only sensible. Besides, it would involve giving a reason to the solicitor, and however much you deserve it, I should hesitate to blacken anyone's character. And for my former employer's sake, someone I respect and admire, the fewer who know about—about his wife's peccadilloes the better."

Their eyes met again.

He said stiffly, "Do you expect me to thank you for your—er—magnanimity?"

"No."

"Just as well, for I realize it's only because it's expedient for you that you're keeping me on.

"Well," she said, "now that we have re- met I suppose we carry on as though we were new acquaintances."

"Thank you," the tone was still ironic. He was determined to carry things off with a high hand. "Let me escort you to the house. I see your brother and sister are already up there."

As they climbed to the house Fergus MacGregor said stiffly, "After you've inspected both properties if you feel you would prefer to have the new house, I shall, of course, just move over with my uncle to the other house."

Jeannie blinked, stopped, turned to face him.

"Your uncle? Are you not married?"

"Of course I'm not. How could you think so?"

"Why shouldn't I think so?"

He hesitated. Then: "Because of the circumstances of our first meeting, I suppose."

Jeannie raised an eyebrow. Her voice held amusement.

"Oh, that! I'm sorry if I seem dim, but these finer shades of conduct have me all mixed up. *If you* had a wife you wouldn't have been embracing Cecily Chalmers . . . yet *she* had a husband. Did *he* not matter?"

Fergus MacGregor said, "I'm afraid the garden is a little overgrown. As a rule my uncle, Mr. Lachlan Murray, keeps it in perfect order, but in the busy season he helps at the sheds."

Jeannie followed his lead. Evidently the discussion was over. His private affairs were not to be her business, and they were nearing the children.

"The garden isn't at all bad. I know every effort must be directed at this time towards the fruit harvest. I shall manage this garden myself, with some help with the heavier work from your uncle. And with regard to the house, I know it's old-fashioned and inconvenient if it's still much the same as twelve years ago, but it has the atmosphere I feel would be right for my brother and

sister. A family atmosphere. They feel a certain insecurity from the loss of their parents."

"When you see the labour-saving gadgets in our house you may change your mind. Your godmother put them in so that Lachie and I need not depend on help from the township. We can—in the main—manage for ourselves."

"Then it would be very unwise of me to interfere with such a sensible policy. Things will remain as they are."

When they met up with the children the atmosphere became less strained. It was hard to be anything but normal and pleasant with the delight the children were displaying in their new surroundings.

Teresa's cheeks were scarlet with excitement. "Jeannie, it's lovely, look at that hillside! What a beautiful place to explore. And it's all ours. There are empty kennels there . . . does that mean we can have another dog? There are fowls too—bags I feed them. Let's go into the house—I'm dying to see round it. Can we have another dog, Jeannie?"

Jeannie saw Peter look away quickly. She said instantly, "That would take thinking out, Teresa. Run on inside, you two."

The children ran in. Mr. MacGregor said, "You don't like dogs, Miss Fraser?"

Not like dogs!

She said quickly, because that was one of the things that had hurt most about living with Bertram, "My likes and dislikes can't possibly concern you, Mr. MacGregor."

"I can see," he said suavely, "that you are a person of strong likes and dislikes."

She did not reply. It would involve mentioning a stepfather who didn't like any animals.

They went into the house. He said, "You will notice it's rather shabby, but Aunt Jean had lived with those things so long she said she was attached to them. It wasn't that she couldn't afford new."

He caught the look of surprise on Jeannie's face. He added, "I knew her from the time I was fifteen. Spent most of my holidays here. I always called her aunt."

Jeannie suddenly felt a usurper. Had she any more right—had she as much—to inherit the orchards than this man? That feeling was instantly succeeded by a wave of anger that he could make her feel this. She suppressed both feelings, went on asking about various things. Was there electric heating of the water or must she rely solely on the old coal range for that? She was glad to know there was; it wasn't much fun when you came in sticky and tired from fruit-picking to find the water cold, or to have to stoke up a fierce fuel stove to heat it. There was an electric stove also, in the scullery.

Finally Jeannie said, "Well, that seems to be all. Anything else can keep till tomorrow. Don't let me delay you too long, Mr. MacGregor."

He seemed as keen as she was to end this session. "I can go over matters with you tomorrow. We're having tea up at the sheds soon, then working till nightfall. I'm sorry you didn't give us time to get things cleared up a bit more here, but I told Lachie to leave you the makings of a meal."

"Why do you call him Lucky, Mr. MacGregor?" asked Teresa. "It's an awfully funny name."

He smiled. It was the first time she had seen him smile, thought Jeannie.

"His name is Lachlan, Teresa. A good old Scots name that fits him well. He's a grand old chap. Quite an age, but still does a good day's work." He turned to Jeannie. "He's an asset to the estate, Miss Fraser, not a liability."

They measured glances again. "I hadn't supposed him to be a liability. In any case, if he had been an incapable old man, would you expect me to turn him off?"

Fortunately the children had gone off to explore upstairs. "I had an idea that you would scarcely be as sentimental as Aunt Jean. That you might have no time for the—er—more tender emotions."

"Because I believe in disciplining one's feelings? Because I don't condone moral lapses?"

Still no hint of guilt in Fergus MacGregor's features.

"Because you find it easier to condemn than to attempt to understand."

She shrugged her shoulders. "I'm not interested enough to ask if there were extenuating circumstances. It's no business of mine. It has merely put

me on my guard. Otherwise I might have accepted you as the model of rectitude the solicitor seems to think you."

Fergus MacGregor turned on his heel and left her.

Jeannie felt strangely shaken. Besides the shock of finding her manager was scarcely a person to be trusted there was uneasiness at the back of her mind. Would he tell Cecily Chalmers? Would Cecily tell Owen? Might her stepfather, through this unfortunate set of coincidences, find them all too soon before she had a chance to prove the children were better looked after, had improved in health?

Jeannie took off her hat, laid it on the bed in the room she had already decided would be hers . . . how heavenly to no longer have to share with Tess . . . ran her hands through her nut-brown hair, tossed it free. Pouf to all these niggling thoughts—they were away from Mr. Skimmington; she would not allow anything to cloud this new beginning.

She ran upstairs. The children were in raptures over the quaint rooms with the dormer windows. They had a lot of junk in them, something that seemed to please them no end.

Peter was saying, "I'll build a window-seat in each . . . and put bookshelves all round. The light from that skylight on the far side is wonderful. Would we have enough money for me to buy wood for shelves and a drawing-board, Jeannie?"

She laughed. "More than enough. And I'll carpet the floor for you to make it warm this winter. Use some of the downstairs carpets, we won't need all those rooms. You can regard these rooms as your own kingdoms, and just use the bedrooms for sleeping in."

Peter said, "And no Bertram coming in wanting to know what you're wasting time with ... He seemed to think I had some sinister purpose in wanting to be alone!"

Jeannie offered up a silent "thank you" for blessings received. It was worth the shock she had just sustained on meeting Fergus MacGregor, to have the children rejoicing in their freedom.

They sorted out bedrooms for themselves. Jeannie took a pointed pleasure in filling one drawer with the dainty undies she had bought in Dunedin, another with the more practical wear she would need for orchard work.

The children could have till next week to shake down in their new surroundings, then she would start them at their schools. She hoped they would settle down all right.

Starting a new school was not easy, but the fact that they were now in a home of their own and freed from the dominance and meanness of Bertram Skimmington would help them regard the change as of little account, she hoped.

Jeannie felt suddenly tired with all the strain and fear of the past week. Their journey was over, they were home!

She called the children. "I saw some tea set out on the table. Let's go and have it—our first meal in our own home. I believe Mr. MacGregor's uncle got in the provisions, and I'm ravenous."

They came out to the old-fashioned kitchen with its rag rugs in the thistle and rose designs Jeannie remembered so well, and looked at the table.

It was covered with checked tea-towels which they removed.

"I'm ravenous too," said Peter, with Teresa echoing him. It was a real country tea. A cold leg of mutton, tomatoes, beetroot, fresh bread, butter, honey in the comb, a plate of large fresh scones and oatcakes, cheese, and—in pride of place in the centre of the table—a large unopened jar of pickles. Mustard pickles. *Skimmington's* pickles!

The three of them gazed at it in fascinated horror. There was the too-familiar olive green and yellow label with, in the centre, the reproduced features of Bertram himself as the founder of the firm.

Jeannie reached it first. She picked it up, carried it to the door, crossed the little square of bricks that was surrounded by currant bushes and a herb garden, took aim fairly and squarely at a silver birch on the far side of the back lawn, and hurled it.

Her aim was excellent. It shattered against the trunk and smashed into a dozen pieces, the yellow cucumber and cauliflower dropping down in a sticky mess to the ground.



Jeannie made her gesture of dusting her hands again.

"So much for Skimmington's Pickles," she said. "May their odour never permeate our house again."

It was a long time since she had heard Teresa and Peter laugh like that, peal after peal.

After that they did full justice to their tea.

Teresa was almost, asleep before they finished it. Jeannie superintended her bath, tucked her into bed, and because the hot day had given place to a colder night, she and Peter lit the range, set about it, relaxed and cosy, planning the years ahead.

Jeannie was most pleased about the change in Peter. His step was brisker, his shoulders straighter, his mouth had lost its sullen line. Her exploit was justified.

When she saw Fergus MacGregor making his way towards the house next morning she realized he probably wanted her to come down to the sheds to meet the team of pickers and sorters. She supposed from now on they would bury the hatchet and proceed as any owner and manager. Nevertheless she knew a tremor of nervousness as she went to the door. She wasn't quite sure how much an owner was supposed to know, to do, to decide.

She opened it, not to find a deferential employee on the step but a very much offended man, who was standing, hands on hips, with a grim expression, surveying the birch tree which still had long streaks of thick mustard pickle adhering to it.

He turned, looked at her.

"May I ask what happened? Or would you consider I was exceeding my position?"

Jeannie said coldly, "I threw it at the tree."

He stared. "You—you threw it at the tree!"

"We don't like mustard pickles."

"You don't like—well, I'll be damned. Tell me, just as a point of curiosity, when you visit, and they serve mustard pickles, are you just as inhibited?"

Jeannie struggled with a temptation to laugh, to tell all, but inner caution held her back. This man was not to be trusted. He wouldn't see it as a gesture of defiance long suppressed, as a symbol of freedom. He might seize on the fact that she wasn't sure if she was within her rights in taking her brother and sister away from the guardianship of their stepfather. He might think that if the children were taken from her she might not stay—that she might therefore be glad to sell out to him. She did not want the fact that she was here mentioned to Cecily, though she wouldn't ask him not to mention it.

So she said with a touch of hauteur far removed from her usual manner, "I really don't see that our behaviour, either at home or abroad, has anything to do with you, Mr. MacGregor."

"No," he said, and there was something in his tone that made Jeannie redden, "but I think it was a pity to treat an old man's preparations for your comfort quite like that. I'll pick it up so that he won't know."

He crossed the lawn, leaving Jeannie curiously deflated. She went into the kitchen, stood there undecidedly, tried to make up her mind what to say when next she met him, heard him go into the detached laundry, presumably to wash his hands, then heard him knock.

"Miss Fraser, I can be free at two-thirty to show you over the property if you wish, and to answer any questions you may have. I would like to go over the books with you also, but I'm afraid that must wait till this crop is in. I daresay you know nothing about orchard work, but as it's seasonal it's a case of flat to the boards while the stuff is ripe but not over-ripe."

Miss Fraser said quietly, "I'm not quite a raw recruit. I had a couple of working holidays on a Hawke's Bay orchard."

"Very good. Then you realize the urgency of it." His voice was entirely unimpressed.

"Of course there's more to it than merely picking, which I imagine was your job."

"Yes. I know nothing of the winter work."

"You won't need to. It can all be left to me."

Jeannie said quietly, "I intend to learn it all. It's not beyond a woman, I suppose?"

He looked wary. "I rather expected you would look on it more as a money-making venture, bringing you in a steady income with no need to work hard."

There was meaning in Jeannie's tone. "Not all women are gold-diggers."

There was no flash in his eyes to indicate that her shot had gone home. He merely remarked, "Very good. Then will two-thirty suit?" Told it would, he nodded goodbye, and left her.

Jeannie watched him go, noting his carelessly arrogant walk, his air of elegance that was somehow surprising. She just could not imagine Cecily Chalmers falling in love with a wage-earner. She loved the fleshpots. That was quite evidently why she had married Owen.

It could be, of course, that she quite genuinely loved Fergus MacGregor. Had she known him before she met Owen? Did they count on Owen being generous, allowing a good alimony? Had the two of them counted on that, so they could buy Strathlachan? Oh well, since Fergus MacGregor stood so high in the mistaken estimation of the solicitor, perhaps it was as well that she, the owner of Strathlachan, knew he was not to be trusted.

Yet some vague feeling of regret stirred in Jeannie. What a pity, after all they had gone through, that there was still a fly in the ointment. Never mind, given time the situation might resolve itself. But even supposing Cecily got a divorce Jeannie was sure she would never marry anyone who was merely a property manager.

A sudden impish thought struck Jeannie. If she did—if—then their positions would certainly be reversed. Where once Cecily had been the employer's wife, Jeannie would then be the employer of Cecily's husband. Jeannie dismissed the thought as it came to her. It was too ridiculous for words. Cecily would probably never come near Corrieferd. One simply could never imagine her relinquishing her position as Owen Chalmers' wife for anything else.

Jeannie banished all unwelcome thoughts, anything that seemed alien to this Eden-like atmosphere. It was a glorious morning with a certain brassiness in the sky already giving warning of another scorching day. This would ripen fruit quickly.

Jeannie walked down the garden path, an uneven brick one with an old-fashioned herringbone pattern, and stood out in the lower field to view her home. It was so long since joy unadulterated had flooded her heart that it seemed something she had dreamed up out of longing and frustration and misery.

Strathlachan had a kindly air, rooted in solidity. It was certainly no architectural gem with its odd corners and gables, but it had a mellow leisurely air that was infinitely charming. Jeannie was glad it had Georgian small-paned windows. There were far too many creepers, of course, and they had got out of hand and would need severe pruning.

It was set to the sunny north, with odd wings so that almost every room got the sun. There was a quaint little balcony on the lower floor that was a real sun-trap. Teresa could lie out there in nothing but briefs and could benefit from the sun-bathing even right through the winters. It wasn't as if she was naturally delicate. It was the change from Fiji and unhappiness that had undermined her health.

Jeannie looked at her inheritance with loving eyes. Geraniums blazed against the rock wall of the terrace, gaillardias and marigolds were fiercely orange. Autumn crocuses lifted frail cups among the weedy beds, bees were busy in great overgrown clumps of Michaelmas daisies. Aubrietia sprawled over the rocky borders of the beds, roses scattered perfume over the whole garden. There were all the old-fashioned, sweet-smelling flowers, here, self-sown night-scented stock that would make summer evenings magic, rosemary, lavender, the scarlet of balsam, dahlias, belladonna lilies on tall stems, fuchsias and tall phlox. Behind the homestead and its fruit-dotted trees were range upon range of tawny hills. My hills, thought Jeannie. This is where I belong.

But she must work. The bedding must all go out on the sunny verandah, the pantry be checked for provisions, the clothes they had used on their junketing about the North washed and hung out in the scented air to dry and whiten. Jeannie was singing as she ran back up the path.

Peter dug carrots and potatoes from the garden for her; Teresa, with never a protest, picked and shelled peas. Jeannie found that Fergus MacGregor's uncle had put steak and chops in the refrigerator for her. That seemed Aunt

Jean's one concession to modern aids. There was no washing-machine, no cake-mixer, none of the things you expected to find in a prosperous home. Not that they cared. Once all Jeannie had dreamed of had been of some day finding that she earned enough to rent a tiny flat. She wasn't looking for luxuries.

There were great apricots in a bowl on the dresser. Jeannie stewed them and made a pie-crust. With the cream from yesterday they would fare all right for dinner.

She could see the big chimney-pipe from the cookhouse smoking furiously. It was oil-burning. They had suddenly lost their cook, and Fergus MacGregor's uncle had taken over. He was a good cook, seemingly.

Midday dinner was the only meal provided. The pickers made their own breakfasts and teas on the half-size electric rangettes each hut was provided with. But cooking the main meal for them saved a lot of time.

Teresa was constantly interrupting Jeannie with raptures over something she had discovered, but Peter was working well. He had chopped wood, swept out the old laundry, fixed a leaky tap and offered suggestions for improving the place with a confidence that gladdened Jeannie's heart. He had certainly needed to be removed from Bertram's dominance.

Jeannie said to him. "I thought we'd get the place all tidied up today. There will be plenty we can't get done all in one day, of course, but by tomorrow I feel we should be prepared to lend a hand with the picking. The weather is perfect and the more hands the better. Even Teresa could probably make herself handy."

Peter said, "Yes, I'd like to pitch in too. Make us feel as if it were really ours . . . yours."

Jeannie shook her head. "Ours, Peter. I told Mr. Gillingham to draw me up some kind of document so that legally it belongs to the three of us. Then later, when you leave school and go to university, you'll have your own income and won't feel dependent upon a sister. You'll have to work darned hard during the vacations of course, but it means you can carry on with the career you had planned."

Peter's appreciation warmed her heart. He added, "But what about you, Jeannie? Any chance of taking up where you had to leave off?"

She shook her head. "No, it's not possible to continue with art training here in Central Otago, so far from the city. Besides, it's too late now. And I will have to live here long enough, Teresa is only nine. It's ceased to hurt a long time ago, Peter. I disciplined myself to that. I haven't much patience with people who allow frustrations to matter too much."

She swung round to find Fergus MacGregor behind her. Peter heard a call from Teresa, who was in the hillside behind the house. He disappeared.

Fergus MacGregor said, "But you haven't much patience with people at all, have you, Miss Fraser?"

"What do you mean, Mr. MacGregor?"

"I mean you have no patience with people who let their emotions get out of hand. You said just now you had none with people who let frustrations matter. Those opinions are too sweeping. A statement like that reveals your own lack of experience. People who have led sheltered lives, who have never known the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune—who have a legacy they have done nothing to earn dropped into their laps, have no right to pass censure on other folk who have known tragedy and heartbreak."

His blue eyes watched a variety of expressions flit over the dusky rose face of the girl in front of him.

Jeannie felt bewildered. So that was how he regarded her. It was laughable really. The spoiled darling of fortune. How dare he! No doubt this man, a forceful, virile man, would have encountered much in his lifetime. But she was ready to swear he had never had to live in the house of a man who hated him, to eat under the eye of someone who begrudged every mouthful, who was sneering and sarcastic to the point of sadism, who had taken from Jeannie's mother even the will to live. . . .

She lifted her chin. "It's also too sweeping for you to presume that because I'm only twenty-two I've experienced nothing of life. There are things in my life that haven't been . . . easy."

"You mean losing your parents? Not easy, I grant you that, but bereavement is easier to bear than some things . . . disillusionment, for instance."

His expression was unreadable. For a moment pity for this man stirred her heart to a new awareness. She crushed it down.

"I didn't mean losing my parents, but let it go. I find your manner to me strange and antagonistic."

"The manner of our first meeting *was* strange and antagonistic. This is merely the outcome. You would hardly expect our relation to be the normal one of owner and manager."

"Perhaps not . . . though I think that should be forgotten now.. . but I still find it odd that you should seek to provoke me so, unless. . ."

She broke off. Fergus MacGregor's eyes narrowed. "Unless what?"

"Unless you hope to goad me into giving you notice. It would probably give you some sort of perverse satisfaction to see me floundering in my efforts to run this place during the height of the busy season— alone!"

His lips were a thin line. "The tortuous reasonings of a woman's mind are beyond me! Women look for motives where none exist. I wish to God this place had been left to a man, someone square-dealing, straightforward, uncomplicated." He paused. "It's simply this, Miss Fraser. I am at a disadvantage because of the circumstances of our first meeting. *But I will not crawl to you.* If I'm to remain here as manager I must run it in my own way, and I absolutely refuse to excuse or explain my conduct to you in any way. Is that clear?"

"Quite clear," said Jeannie, and no one would have guessed that her knees were trembling. "For the welfare of the property we must work together. I have no intention of trying to appear self-righteous or priggish. Only it's just as well for you to know that I have certain standards. I will tolerate no slackness in your dealings with the women pickers. And you will not find me gossiping about your affairs. Our own relations will remain purely on a business footing."

His furious eyes met hers. There was contempt in them. "I have no desire for them to be on any other footing, believe me."

Jeannie was horrified to find herself flushing. But she stood her ground. "Mr. MacGregor! I find that offensive. It wasn't even within the scope of my meaning. I meant that from now on our conversation can be confined purely to business matters.—And should you come up behind me to overhear any tail-ends of private talk, I would be glad if you would refrain from commenting on my own personal views. What has happened in the past has

no possible connection with what will happen in the future. It is—as far as I'm concerned— finished with."

His gaze was sombre and suddenly the animosity was gone from his tone.

"Are we ever finished with the past? I read once that the future doesn't come from in front to meet us, but from behind— streaming up over our heads."

There was an odd silence between them, but not an awkward one. For a fleeting instant Jeannie had a vivid memory of her father. Those were the sort of things he used to say, to quote, in those dear far-off days. She pulled herself together.

"As far as I'm concerned, Mr. MacGregor, the past is over. My own too. I'm starting a new life here. Now ..." she looked at her watch, "it's not half-past two yet, but perhaps you've come to tell me you are ready to conduct me over the property?"

"I have. The work is going ahead very nicely. Perfect conditions. I can give you the rest of the afternoon. We'll use the truck to cover the ground, as it's very extensive. Hugh Kelvington bought the land from the adjoining property. The person who bought it—Elizabeth Goldie—wanted only the house, and half an acre."

Jeannie wrinkled her brows. "Elizabeth Goldie ... that sounds familiar ... oh, Elizabeth Goldie the florist."

"Well ... the woman who writes books about floral art."

"Yes, I meant that. How delightful it will be to meet her."

"She is a delightful person."

Jeannie thought, "This is better. Keep on with small talk, that's the thing. Let our other encounters recede. Overlay them with ordinary routine stuff so that they fade. It's important that Strathlachan should be run well, nothing must interfere with that—not personal enmity or anything—for it means security for the children. And if what happened in Auckland fades, then perhaps no hint of my being here will get back there. Besides, even if he does keep in touch with Cecily Chalmers by letter he may think it wiser not to mention me. ..."

As they turned to the truck standing at the picket gate, they saw an elderly man hastening down the hillside from the cookhouse.



"Hullo," said Fergus. "Something's wrong."

They reached the gate together. The old man said: "Fergus, there's weather coming. Adverse report just came over, followed by a ring from the post office. An emergency report. A freak storm approaching. We're right in the path of it. They think it will miss Roxburgh, but the centre may strike here. Hail."

Perhaps it was just as well Jeannie didn't hear what her manager muttered under his breath. Then he shrugged, lifted his head, looked to the south-west.

"How long Lachie?"

"Perhaps not till nightfall, but mebbe earlier."

"Right. It will have to be all hands on deck. If it holds off I'll ask the crowd to work on till dark. Give them a substantial break at three, Lachie. Sandwiches and pasties. Those pasties that were for tomorrow. And they can have a savoury supper back in their huts when it's over. Right?"

Jeannie was introduced briefly to the old man. She said to her manager, "I'll come to help. So will the children. Peter came with me the last working holiday I had at Hawke's Bay, so he's quite experienced, and I daresay even Teresa could help with something?"

Fergus MacGregor said, "Yes, she could help Lachie in the cookhouse." Then he hesitated. "But perhaps that wouldn't be novel enough for a youngster. I'll find her something else to do. I'm not keen on young kids up ladders, that's all. But perhaps she can trot about relieving the pickers of their buckets. She looks tough, even if she's too thin." He stopped, looked at Jeannie. "Why the surprise?"

Caught out, she faltered, "Just—just that you should understand that a child would find helping in the cookhouse too ordinary. I—"

He sighed exasperatedly. "Surprised to find I have a few decent feelings, aren't you? I have my moments of surprise too ... I give you credit for wanting to help. I realize you must be tired and that there's endless sorting and cleaning to do in the house on your first day. Thank you, Miss Fraser."

She said drily, "On second thoughts you'll probably decide my motives are not entirely disinterested. I'll report at the shed in five minutes."

She got into a pair of faded green jeans and a wash-out T-shirt she had worn on holiday. It would never do to appear first in the new ones she had purchased. That would mark her as a new chum.

The pace was steady, not forced. She couldn't help but admit to herself that Fergus MacGregor knew how to handle people.

"The temptation will be to work so fast you'll suffer from fatigue too quickly. I'd appreciate it if no time is wasted, folk, but don't wear yourselves out. If we can get this lot of nectarines and peaches picked you can have an equivalent amount of time off tomorrow. You could take the truck and have an afternoon in Roxburgh."

The sun got hotter and hotter with the blinding brilliance that foretokens thunder. From a distance and from an artistic point of view it looked idyllic . . . the girls in their bright jeans and blouses, their big Mexican hats, the men in their checked shirts and khaki drills, but the perspiration was pouring off them as they picked the rosy and golden fruit with the sun beating down on their shoulder-blades or dazzling them under the brim of their hats.

The pace was too fast for Jeannie to notice any restraint in the manner of the women pickers towards her. This was perhaps the best way of being introduced to them. There was no feeling here of workers being inspected. Peter was enjoying it immensely. She must see to it that he was paid the same rates as the others. It would do him good to feel he had earned his own money.

Teresa was in fine fettle, her pony-tail of tawny hair flying out behind her, tied with an emerald ribbon, her cheeks scarlet with exertion and importance. Just as well no one had time to be talking with her, for Teresa had never heard of Talleyrand, and in any case would never have agreed with him that words are given us to conceal our thoughts.

Jeannie didn't suppose any of the pickers came from Auckland or knew Mr. Skimmington, but the long arm of coincidence had sometimes to be reckoned with. As witness her own meeting with Fergus MacGregor. She pushed her cares and fears to the back of her mind and worked on.

At tea-break Fergus told her he was pleased with the progress made.

"It looks as if we may—we just may—get in all the stone crop that's ready before the storm breaks. It will spoil some of the apples, of course. The Tasmans and the Cleopatras will probably hail-spot badly, but even so it's not all loss, though it certainly cuts down on profits. We sell the hail-pitted stuff cheap locally." He grinned. "No good ever getting in a flap about weather when you're fruit-farming. If it isn't one thing it's another . . . frost, or brown-rot or something. If we get a mild winter and early spring we nearly always get a late very severe frost. We hardly ever get a cherry season over without hail, but we always make out."

Jeannie felt light-hearted in spite of the threat of storm. After all, as he had said, there were always hazards; even high winds could cause untold damage, and stuck out here in the middle of the Pacific, New Zealand got its fair share of winds. These days prices were good, and transport to the best markets excellent.

Years ago, in the depression, growers had lived from hand to mouth, and a sudden hailstorm, unheralded in those days by radio reports, could have put some out of business. But Uncle Hugh and Aunt Jean had always weathered the bad seasons.

The substantial repast revived them all. Now the wind sprang up and turned the perspiration cold on them as clouds massed over the sun. Then the sun came out again and they thought they might weather it yet. The wind dropped as suddenly as it had risen and the landscape took on a peculiar colour, every blade of grass stood out vividly green; the tussocks on the farther hills were metallic gold where the sun shone down in blinding shafts, the flowers in the garden were so bright it hurt the eyes to look at them, and the sky turned indigo. It was a glorious sight over a field of mustard beyond the river.

They were near enough to finish when suddenly Fergus MacGregor, working tirelessly with them, gave orders to finish.

"Never mind about filling your buckets. Empty them into the trailer, I want them all under cover now. No hesitating."

Even so they were caught in it. Fergus flung a tarpaulin over the trailer, scooped Teresa up on the tractor beside him, revved up the engine, and got the load into the shed.

They all scooted for shelter, then stood in the doorways watching it . . . spectacular, fearsome, disastrous if not ruinous, especially for those whose picking might not have been as far forward as their own.

They were large sharp hailstones, thick and white, and their onslaught seemed venomous. The gutterings on the sheds soon blocked, with cascades pouring over, the small amount of ripe fruit left on the trees was smashed to pulp, the air turned as chill as winter.

Twenty minutes and it was all over. The girls had shaken the hailstones out of their hair and now ventured forth. The slopes were slippery, the whole hillside opposite had the look of a snowfall. Out came the sun.

Fergus MacGregor shrugged. "Twenty minutes—but it's certainly cost us a packet." He looked at his watch.

"Eight o'clock... off you go to your huts. Those of you who got soaked had better be sensible and shower. Lachie says the boiler is going full steam, but remember there are a lot of you—study each other because it's not an inexhaustible supply. Usual time in the morning. We'll concentrate on grading and packing then."

They were left at the door of the shed, Peter, Teresa, Lachie, Jeannie, Fergus, watching the pickers carefully make their way up the streaming slope to the huts.

Teresa said, looking up at Lachlan Murray, her profile purely concave in a pathetic curve that caught at Jeannie's heart with its delicacy and fragility, "Did you really mean what you said before, Uncle Lachie?"

Jeannie gave a little dismayed gasp at the familiarity.

Lachlan looked at her shrewdly. "Och now, dinna be shamin' the wee lassie with reproof. It was maseP told her to use that name. Mr. Murray's an awfu' big handful for a wee lassie like yon one."

Jeannie looked rueful. "I—it's very kind of you, Mr. Murray, but my little sister is the oncoming kind in any case. One can't set her back. You mustn't allow her to be too familiar."

Her protest went unheeded. Teresa said impatiently, "**Did** you mean it, Uncle Lachie?" She gave a triumphant sidelong glance at her sister.

"Aye, I did an' all. After a crowd like I had for dinner, three extra for the evening meal will seem naething."

Jeannie looked completely dismayed now. "Mr. Murray, did Teresa ask if she— we—could come?"

"No. It was right and proper we should ask you. Yesterday we had nae chance. And I thought you would want to be settling in your own wee hoose, but we'd like fine to have you tonight. Come over in say three- quarters of an hour. It's just a bachelor establishment, you ken. Nae frills, but good and wholesome."

Jeannie turned to her manager, her eyes uncertain.

"Just accept it," he told her easily. "I was out of favour yesterday because I insisted you would prefer your first meal to be in your own home. It offended Lachie's Scots sense of hospitality."

It was quite an effort to appear gracious.

She would so much sooner have prepared their own meal, had it in the sanctuary of their own home. However, no doubt she would have to look the manager's house over some time and it would serve to get things on a normal footing.

Lachie was certainly a good cook, turning on a Chinese curry which he had had the good sense to make fairly mild to suit a child's taste. Fergus MacGregor was so punctilious, so much the perfect host that Jeannie could easily have let herself be ruffled by it.

Certainly the house had been built with an eye to its needing a minimum effort to keep clean, and it was comfortable in a masculine, bare sort of way, but it lacked the softer touches a woman would have brought to it.

The children were now playing a new and fascinating game of dominoes with Lachlan. Fergus showed Jeannie over the rest of the house.

"Are you quite sure, now you've seen it, Miss Fraser, that you wouldn't like my uncle and myself to turn this over to you and take up our abode in the old place?"

She shook her head. "I don't so easily change my mind."

"Changing one's mind is not always a sign of weakness, you know. Sometimes it's a sign of strength. And common sense."

Jeannie said, a note of impatience in her voice, "I assure you, Mr. MacGregor, I don't belong to the breed that prides itself on having an inflexible will. But I'm not easily swayed or changeable. And I'm not

particularly a lover of all things modern. My memories here are all tied up with the old house and a never-to-be-forgotten summer. I've never been so happy since."

He looked at her sharply. "What do you mean? Is that true? Or only a dramatic statement, rather overdone?"

Her tone was uneven a little, but showed no resentment. "It's not in the least overdone. It's only too true. That summer was the one before my father died. He had leukaemia. We went to Fiji to live because Daddy loved Fiji so.

"He got weaker and weaker, though he kept painting and painting, hoping that some of his pictures would sell well enough to keep us above want. But he was working against time. Mother had never been brought up to economize. Life wasn't easy for her. She died last year. That was what I meant, Mr. MacGregor. I didn't have much childhood after that summer. The spectre of death was always with us."

He said, rather gently, the blue eyes not hard for once, but quite kindly, "I'm sorry. I feel one should always have a happy childhood to look back upon. I did have that, even if—" He broke off, and as if ashamed of this softening, said briskly, "Now, while the youngsters are happily engaged with my uncle, would you come into the office and sign one or two papers? They're all quite straightforward. I haven't time to go into much tonight; we'll do that later when the busy season is over."

They were quite simple. Jeannie could understand them well.

She said, a note of surprise in her voice, "Your business records are extraordinarily well kept. Do you do them as well as an accountant?"

His tone was dry. "I am—was—an accountant."

Jeannie's surprise caused her to commit a blunder. "You were an accountant? Then what in the world made you take up orcharding? And not even on your own account?"

He didn't answer for a moment, then said, "If you must ask awkward questions I must be ill-mannered myself and refuse to answer. My reasons are my own."

For one moment Jeannie felt sick with shame, then she rallied, looking up at him directly, apology in the hazel-green eyes.

"I must cry pardon, Mr. MacGregor. That was quite unforgivable. Believe me, I'm not in the least in the habit of asking personal questions like that. I believe in people having privacy in their lives."

She was now wearing a simple green checked frock, with a childish-looking coral necklace, from Fiji, he supposed, about her brown throat. Her cheeks were flushed with embarrassment, her eyes starry with the hint of unshed tears of mortification.

To his own surprise Fergus McGregor flicked her cheek as he might have done to a rueful child. He said lightly, "Oh, never mind. We all *commit faux pas* at some time or other. Think no more about it. I should just have headed you off instead of taking it seriously."

Indeed he had wondered at himself taking it that way. Others had asked. He'd merely said, "Oh, I took a yen for the outdoor life. One gets sick of being cooped up in an office."

Others hadn't asked. They had known why.

Jeannie realized that this man, met on an ordinary footing, would have... well, quite away with him. Disarming. Dangerous. She had already decided she didn't wonder the solicitor trusted him. He gave the air of reliability, trustworthiness ... Of course, that was the trouble with these gay deceivers, they did.

She said coolly, "We certainly do tend to get on to the personal side of things. A pity, don't you think? Let's get back to business."

They got back to it with a vengeance. Jeannie's office training stood her in good stead. She realized that when it came to really going through the books it would be a formidable business, but this man's training would mean that all would be in apple-pie order.

"Now, if you're fully satisfied, Miss Fraser, perhaps you would sign these three papers?"

She signed them.

He picked up the last one after blotting it, studied her signature and said, for no reason at all except that a constraining silence seemed to have fallen on them:

"Leslie Jean Fraser! I always thought that girls who were called Lesley spelled it L-e-s-l-e-y."

Jeannie said, just as idly, "Oh, but mine wasn't a Christian name. It was my mother's surname." She added, "I didn't mind it being spelt the masculine way as long as she hadn't called me Fay after her as well. Mother suited it, she had golden curls and baby-blue eyes. But it doesn't go with freckles."

She looked up, laughing, the despised freckles a mere scattering across the bridge of her nose. The laughter died on her lips. There was a strange look on Fergus MacGregor's face.

He said, "You're Fay Leslie's daughter? Yes, of course. She *did* marry an artist. She came from Dunedin? Was she Howard Leslie the architect's daughter? Was she, tell me?"

"She was." Jeannie's lips were stiff. She felt afraid. What had her mother to do with—?

He gave a short, unamused laugh. "And you had the nerve to sit in judgement on me. I only hope, Miss Fraser, that my uncle never knows you're Fay Leslie's daughter. He is the eldest of a very large family. He had a cherished young brother, born late in life to his parents. My Uncle Ian. He fell in love with Fay Leslie. An ideal match, everyone thought. He built her a lovely home, her father designed it. She jilted him two days before the wedding, ran away with an artist. But you'll know all this."

Jeannie swallowed. "I didn't.. . Goon." Ian ... the name that had been on her mother's lips before she died. She had said, "If Ian knows, he will know I paid in full for all I did to him. ..."

Fergus's remorseless voice continued. "Can you imagine what it did to a sensitive young fellow? The house was furnished throughout, the wedding presents in, he would be the laughing-stock, he thought, of his whole office. He couldn't take it. He shot himself. On the hearth in front of the fire that had been laid ready to light on their return from their honeymoon."

He wasn't looking at Jeannie, he was gazing out across the room. "It broke Ian's father up. He was an old man, and he never recovered. For that matter I don't think your mother's father ever got over it. Just as if a woman—like that—is worth a man's life." Again he laughed. "And you—Fay Leslie's daughter—sat in judgement on me!"



He swung round and looked at her. Her face was white beneath the tan and the freckles. It was almost as if she didn't see him. As if she was looking past him into some room of the past.

She said queerly, as if forced to say it, "The sins of the *mothers*. How right you were, Mother." She came out of her preoccupation, gave a slight shake to her head, said in her normal tone,

"I'll just go home through those french windows, Mr. MacGregor. Would you tell the children I have a headache and have gone home? Send them home fairly soon. I—I— don't feel like meeting your uncle again right away."

Fergus MacGregor took a couple of strides after her, caught her arm as she opened the windows.

"I'll come with you. It's dark—no moon—and the track is littered with tree branches and loose stones."

She freed herself gently, firmly. "No, thank you. It so happens I'm one who can see very well in the dark. Green-eyed folk do, I believe. And I must have a few moments to pull myself together before the children come in. I don't want them to know. They have suffered enough as it is from my mother's impulsive actions. I don't want them disillusioned any further."

His hand restrained her once more. "What do you mean?"

She looked up at him with a curiously defenceless look. "I *don't* have to answer that . . . any more than you had to answer my too curious question . . . but you know so much one more humiliation won't matter. The second time my mother married she married for money. Oh, not for herself, but for us, for security, a home. And brought us under the tyranny of a miserly, cruel step-father. The sort I thought existed only in fairytales."

She looked up at him. "But perhaps we do reap as we sow. If ever anybody paid my mother did. Goodnight, Mr. MacGregor."

She paused on the sill, turned to face him again. Her head came up, she lifted her chin. "But oddly enough I don't hold it against her. I loved my darling little foolish mother."

Fergus MacGregor caught the swift glimmer of tears in her eyes.

"And ... in spite of all her faults ... at least my mother never played fast and loose after she was married. *She* respected the marriage vow." And she

was gone into the night that she preferred to this man's company. He stood looking after her.

**J**EANNIE reached the top of the rise and paused before going into the homestead garden through the picket gate. Her eyes, accustomed now to the darkness, swept the shadowy outlines of the scene below ... Fergus MacGregor's lighted house against the dark trees. She realized that until the scene in the study it had been surprisingly pleasant to visit like that. The old uncle was a pet, the children loved him already, it had given them a feeling of family. She had sensed that at the meal-hour.

When she first arrived at Strathlachan she had been scathing to MacGregor about his own standards of conduct, and now he knew her for the daughter of a woman who had had very few standards of conduct herself ... who had been charming, weak, spoilt ... He would always feel she was tarred with the same brush. Even if in time he realized she wasn't, he would always resent her as Fay's daughter, and the girl who had inherited the land he had hoped to own ... the land he had brought to full productivity. What a coil!

For one overwhelming, unworthy moment Jeannie longed to be free of all responsibilities, from all connections with her mother's past, even the children. To be able to renounce it all, to leave here, to bury herself in some city where no one knew her, to have a job, her own job, and nobody but herself to keep.

The moment passed. Down the hillside she saw a door open, a shaft of warm light stream out, then three figures emerge, the tallest one carrying a powerful torch. Fergus MacGregor was bringing the children home.

Jeannie sped up the path, opened the door, turned on the lights. Fergus left them at the back door. They came in, full of concern.

Peter said, "Have you taken some aspirin, Sis? I told Mr. MacGregor you never suffered from headaches. He said it must have been the travelling and a busy day today. He said there'd be only packing tomorrow so you could have a lie-in."

He didn't tell her he had shown disproportionate alarm to Fergus, and had said, "Why, I don't remember Jeannie ever feeling ill. She never gives in.

You don't think it's more than a headache, sir? She's not going to be really ill?"

Fergus had put a kindly hand on the lad's shoulder, feeling guilty and trying to reassure him.

"She'll only be overtired. Don't panic, Peter."

Peter had said, suddenly a schoolboy once again, "You see, sir, she's all we've got."

Fergus, looking into the boy's face, suddenly realized that it was natural to panic. He had seen his father slowly dying, and later, had lost his mother. He didn't know all the story. Presumably the step-father had died too. Jeannie Fraser had said her mother had married for money, security. Possibly the stepfather had sensed this, resented it, and left his own money away from them.

An unwilling admiration for Jeannie Fraser, supporting two children, stirred in him. There didn't seem much of her mother in her. He pulled up his thoughts. You could never tell—the shallowness would probably be there.

"A good night's rest will be all she wants," he said. "I—er—overdid the business side with her after a big day. Give her a drink of hot milk with nutmeg on top, and her breakfast in bed tomorrow, and I guess she'll be all right."

The children were reassured at sight of Jeannie. She had rubbed her cheeks vigorously to bring the colour back into them and had infused vigour into her voice.

She refused the offer of a hot drink . . . "Good heavens, no, besides, I can't stand nutmeg. All I need is bed. Now, off you go."

They were asleep in no time. But not Jeannie.

When Bertram caught up with her, as undoubtedly he would someday, she had hoped to prove the children were being well looked after. She had an idea she would need witnesses to support this. No doubt Lachlan Murray and Fergus MacGregor would be asked for their opinions. As she was the daughter of Fay Leslie they might think she was irresponsible, impulsive, unsuitable. . . . Even her headlong flight from Auckland savoured in instability. Jeannie fell asleep as the grey dawn came streaking through her

windows, and didn't wake till she found Peter at her bed proudly offering a tray.

One thing, life on the orchards in February left little time for brooding, for dread, though Jeannie often anticipated a visit from the local policeman. In fact, whenever she saw him in the streets of the tiny township she felt a little sick. Some day he might come to make enquiries on behalf of Bertram.

But in the main Jeannie was too tired at nights to lie awake worrying. She'd made the attempt, and thus far it had proved right as far as the children were concerned. Teresa had settled down very happily at the school, and if she spread any tales about having had a Wicked Stepfather Jeannie could only hope that folk would not take her seriously and would put it down to a child's love of romancing. However, she had an idea the child was so happy to be free of Bertram that she just might keep her own counsel. Meanwhile Jeannie did not want to harp on the need for secrecy too much—it would be a pity to destroy the frankness of childhood and perhaps substitute a sense of guilt. Peter could be relied upon.

He went fifteen miles each way every day by school bus to the District High School in the nearest larger town, and had been entered in an O-level form. Jeannie had gone to see the headmaster, found him most approachable, and had told him something, not all, of the situation, saying the legacy of the orchard had been a godsend, but letting it be inferred that the stepfather had been rather glad to be rid of their responsibility and that it had given the lad the opportunity to carry on with his education.

She hoped Bertram would not think of enquiring at Peter's old school, for she knew that the headmaster here would have to obtain his grading, but Bertram wouldn't if he thought they had gone to FIJI.

Her dealings with her manager were outwardly cordial, and since Lachlan was kindness itself to her and to Peter and Teresa she supposed she ought to be grateful to Fergus MacGregor for not telling his uncle she was Fay Leslie's daughter.

Teresa was Lachlan's shadow, while Peter had attached himself to Fergus. Jeannie schooled herself not to resent this. She told herself that Peter had known the lack of a father so long that this was what he needed, the

companionship of a man. But it was a pity he had to hero-worship someone not worthy of it.

Fergus said to her one day at the packing- shed where they were alone, skilfully and quickly packing fruit for air-freight to the North Island, "By the way, young Teresa asked me the other day if after school she could be allowed to stay down at the wayside stall and serve. It seems it's a great ambition of hers to enter big business."

Jeannie stiffened with dismay. There was too much risk in that. In late February, even here on the main road to Dunedin from the Southern Lakes, there were many holiday- makers from Auckland. They often stopped at the stall to buy the small bags of fruit, delighting in the novelty of it. Teresa's Auckland school had been a large one. There was bound to be someone someday who knew her.

"No," said Jeannie hastily, "I shouldn't approve at all."

"Why?"

"I—I—just don't fancy the idea."

He laughed, not pleasantly. "Teresa's middle name could well be Persistence ... I don't think she'd find that an adequate reason."

"Well, Teresa will just have to learn that when I put my foot down about something I mean it. She's not going on the roadside stall."

He looked at her curiously. "You're usually keen for them to help. I don't see why she shouldn't."

"Mr. MacGregor, in things that pertain to the well-being of the orchards I bow to you. In this the decision is mine."

"Very well," he said, in the tone men reserve for women who are displaying unreasonable whims, walking away to the scales. "But it smacks of snobbery."

Snobbery! Anger washed over Jeannie. As if she'd mind Teresa serving on the stall! She kept her voice calm though.

"Snobbery has nothing to do with it, Mr. MacGregor. I just don't want Teresa to do it."

"But you haven't a reason, have you? Which forces me to believe you think it beneath the dignity of the owner to have her sister serve on the stall."

"Mr. MacGregor, that's petty. There is no reason why I must account to you for anything I decide about the children, is there?"

"None. And I agree it *is* petty. You're simply refusing Tess because *I* was the one who put it up to you. In matters referring to the running of Strathlachan you have to defer to my more experienced judgement, and it galls you. So when you're within your rights you would rather thwart a child than give in to me."

Jeannie was saved a reply by the fact that someone came into the shed at that moment, someone who was a stranger. He had a city air about him, being tall, broad-shouldered, with tapering hips and a slim waist. He had dark hair, surprisingly blue eyes, a pleasant manner and, to Jeannie, a faintly familiar air.

Anyone who had a familiar air was unwelcome to her. She had never lost the dread of seeing someone from Auckland days walk in.

His greeting was charming, easy in an impudent way.

"Hullo, Fergus. I've come to meet the heiress. Can't have you keeping all the good things to yourself, old boy."

His eyes, dancing with fun, met Jeannie's.

Irresistibly her heart warmed to his light inconsequential manner. She and her manager were so constantly on guard with each other, always aware that the other knew things better not known.

Fergus laughed, performed the introduction, and with a casual manner that took the sting from the actual words, said:

"This is one Neville Oliver, Miss Fraser. Do not trust him, gentle maiden."

Neville looked quizzical. "*Is* she a gentle maiden?"

"She is not." For a moment Fergus MacGregor's voice sounded grim. "She's more of an Amazon, despite her size."

Neville shook his head. "You have no finesse, Fergus. What woman would like to be called an Amazon? Even the battle-axe types. . . you know, like old Agatha Pyeford . . . like to be called sweetie and petsie. There are plenty of women in history who were not gentle maidens, but to be likened to them would be far more complimentary than dragging in the Amazons, even if they were really more dangerous . . . rocked thrones, started wars!"

Fergus said unkindly, "To what women would you compare Miss Fraser, then?"

Neville studied her mock-seriously. "By my pulses ... a sure sign! I'd say Joan of Arc, Anne Boleyn, the Pompadour. . .even Helen of Troy—yes, that face could launch a thousand ships, I'd say. None of them gentle maidens ... they sued for war rather than offering peace, as the immortal bard puts it ... but any woman, every woman wishes she had something in her of women like that."

Jeannie suddenly laughed, the most carefree laugh she had enjoyed since coming to Central Otago. "You're quite mad, aren't you?"

He surveyed her seriously again. "But very good fun," he said solemnly. "Fergus will warn you about me. I'm a wolf. My intentions are never honourable. But at least I'm candid. I don't don sheep's clothing."

Fergus was laughing too, so Jeannie could only suppose this was foolery.

"You're only candid when it pays to be, Neville. If it wasn't that I know you so well and you think I shall warn Miss Fraser, you would never admit to the wolfish tendencies."

Neville grinned. "I shan't stand a chance with her if you in turn are going to be so devastatingly frank. Can it be that you yourself have an eye on the lady and her acres?"

Fergus's voice was derisive, his meaning definite to Jeannie.

"No, I can assure you I have not."

Neville whistled. "He almost sounds serious. Can't imagine why not. Your taste and your common sense are at fault, old man. Beauty *and* booty. Charm and lots of little apples."

Fergus was laughing. "You're making Miss Fraser bewildered, Neville. She's never met up with your sort before."

Jeannie laughed with them. "And the idea of being looked upon as an heiress is decidedly novel too. My modest orchards!"

"Ah!" said Neville darkly. "Modest to you, but to penniless folk like Fergus and myself decidedly plutey. Besides, who knows? There may still be gold in them than hills. Someone biting into a pear from Strathlachan may yet find golden pips. Nice solid little nuggets." He shook his head. "Fergus,



you're more of a canny Scot than I realized. Here you are, still on formal terms with . . . Jeannie! After all, Otago has a name for being friendly."

Fergus, the laughter gone, said, "Miss Fraser is my employer and she and I have agreed that we remain strictly on those terms. Business/"

Neville whistled again. "I can feel the temperature dropping. Good heavens, Fergus, not still hankering after Cecily, are you?"

Jeannie was shocked by Neville's bluntness. She saw Fergus's jaw tighten and the flesh show white and taut over his prominent cheekbones.

"I am *not* still hankering after Cecily, Neville, and—"

Neville cut in, holding up a hand. "All right, Fergus, let it go. I know when I've gone too far." He put a hand under Jeannie's elbow. "Come on, take me up to the house and show me over. And I'd like to take you to the local pictures tonight. Very hicky, of course, but when you get to know me better I'll take you to Dunedin for something a little more sophisticated."

"I doubt if I will," said Jeannie, going with him because she felt she must remove him from Fergus's vicinity. "I don't leave my sister and brother alone in the house at night. They're too young and it's an old wooden house. But do come and look it over."

It was impossible to remain on formal terms with Neville. There was something impudently engaging about him. He did his best to make her change her mind.

"You're not one of these tiresomely good females who are devoted to duty, are you?"

Jeannie surveyed him calmly. "You're just saying that to provoke me into saying I'll come with you. Because no girl likes to feel she's regarded as strictly sensible. But as far as my responsibilities are concerned I am. And I don't mind."

"Hasn't Fergus taken you out at all? Shown you the sights?"

"No. His idea of relaxation seems to be to spend hours on the books at night."

Neville grinned. "It wasn't always . . . believe me."

An odd chill ran over Jeannie. Odd, because why should she mind—What did Neville mean—that Fergus had once hit the high spots with Cecily? And

how did Neville know about it? Jeannie realized she knew nothing about Cecily's background and she certainly wouldn't ask.

"Fergus is probably glad you turned me down," said Neville. "He disapproves of me. Don't take my warnings too seriously."

Jeannie said coldly, "I think Mr. Mac- Gregor is scarcely interested enough in me to warn me off."

Neville cocked a black eyebrow at her. "You and he don't hit it off? Why?" He waved an airy hand. "Now *don't you* get all upstage with me. I always drop bricks. I rush in where archangels would fear to tiptoe. I suppose old Fergus doesn't like working for a woman. He's that type. And he feels you did nothing to deserve your good luck."

Jeannie was too outraged to speak.

Neville put a finger under her averted chin, turned it round.

"No good getting mad with me. Just forget it. I'm quite unsnubbable."

Jeannie laughed. It was no use. And somehow the encounter left her feeling cheered, except for one thing—the reference to Cecily. If Neville Oliver knew about it, someone who wasn't a close friend of Fergus's, then the affair must have been serious and well-known. Jeannie plunged into work.

She found herself wishing she hadn't had to turn down Neville's invitation. It would have been fun, and it would somehow have gratified in her an unworthy desire to go against Fergus. He had warned her lightly against Neville, in front of him, and according to Neville would be likely to follow it up with serious warnings. How hypocritical, when you thought of Fergus's own standards.

The phone rang. Fergus. Jeannie waited for the warning.

He said, "It would do you good to get out, Miss Fraser. It isn't good for anyone to be as confined to the place as you are. Besides, in a small country place you can be regarded as stand offish if you don't join in everything. So I'm coming up tonight to stay in the house with the youngsters. I've told Neville. I rang him. He's calling for you at twenty to eight."

Words failed Jeannie.

He said quickly after a short interval, "Are you still there, Miss Fraser?"

She swallowed. "Yes, yes, I'm here, Mr. MacGregor. I—I—aren't you being rather high-handed? I might not have wanted to go out with Mr. Oliver."

His voice was dry. "All women like to go out with Mr. Oliver. He has a way with him. But I do realize you're over-burdened with responsibility for a girl of twenty-two. And you take life far too seriously. You'll be shrewish soon if you don't have some light relief. I'll be up at seven-thirty. Goodbye for now." He hung up.

Jeannie found she was still holding the receiver and staring at the wall. She hadn't even said goodbye. Fergus MacGregor was completely unpredictable. No warning about Neville. Even Neville himself had expected it. She gave it up. She would just enjoy the outing.

In Auckland, where one could really have had a gay time, she hadn't dared, because her stepfather had so disapproved. She thought it was probably because she saved him a housekeeper's wages and he didn't want to lose her. Jeannie had gone out once or twice with young men from the office, but she hadn't been interested enough to continue with it in the face of her stepfather's opposition, and it had brought his usual form of punishment... he had been nastier and more vindictive than usual with the children after each outing. So Jeannie, trying to be philosophical about it, had stayed home at nights.

She went to look over her wardrobe. It was a good job the theatre here was "hicky" because though she had bought a few clothes that morning in Dunedin there had been no time to get much for more formal occasions. But she thought the brown polished cotton that had all the richness of silk and was splashed with poppies and girdled with a crimson cummerbund might look reasonably festive under her short brown jacket with the high collar.

When at tea-time Peter sounded approving about her outing with Mr. Oliver she said rather sharply, "I suppose Mr. MacGregor put you up to persuading me to go."

Peter looked bewildered. "What if he had? Decent of him to come up, Sis. Though I think we're old enough now to stay alone."

She shook her head. "No, if it was going to be an early night I wouldn't mind, but I shouldn't care for the idea of you going to sleep in an old wooden

house before I get in, and it's too late for you to stop up. You would be too tired for school next day, especially when you have such a distance to travel."

Jeannie somehow expected Fergus to come armed with a pile of accounts. Not so.

He carried a set of Monopoly under one arm, and in a picnic basket some bottles of fizz and some chocolates.

She saw him from the window of her room, coming up through the garden that was riotous with early autumn flowers and spicy with cinnamon, pinks and carnations.

Jeannie had set a fire in the drawing-room, though it was still too warm to light it. She heard Teresa taking him in, Peter's voice sounding eager and welcoming. It was difficult to be stand-offish when the children liked him so.

They were sitting around a card-table laying out the board when she came in.

Teresa looked up. "Oh, Jeannie!" she exclaimed. "Don't you look ravishing!"

They all laughed. Teresa was at the stage of using big words. Jeannie flushed a little. She waved a deprecatory hand.

"Don't take any notice of my little sister, Mr. MacGregor, all her geese are swans. It's a new frock she hasn't seen before, that's all."

Teresa slipped off her chair, came to Jeannie, fingered the full skirt, walked around her, took in the red Chinese amber necklace and stud earrings to match that had belonged to their mother and had been bought in Fiji, smoothed the cummerbund with great satisfaction, turned to Fergus and said:

"It's heavenly seeing Jeannie in such nice dresses. We had to be so careful of money, and she used to spend most of her wages on our things—we grew out of them, you see—so she used to make hers last ages. Beastly Bertram wouldn't buy us anything he didn't have to."

"Hush, Teresa," said Jeannie quickly. "That's all over and done with. You're to go to bed at half-past eight. That's half an hour extra, and you're not to make a fuss when it comes. Peter knows his time."

She was conscious of Fergus's eyes upon her. She was annoyed to realize that the colour in her cheeks was probably as bright as the poppies on her dress.

She hoped Teresa wouldn't chatter too much, though Peter was good at heading her off. He certainly had had great experience at it. Teresa's dread of returning to Bertram was wearing off. It was to the good in some ways, for no child should live with fear, but if only she would remember not to give away the fact that they were runaways.

She heard Neville's car draw up.

Fergus MacGregor's voice was quite kindly. "Now enjoy yourself—make the most of your night off."

Jeannie should have been pleased at the kindness. As it was, her reaction to it puzzled her. She felt disgruntled. But why in the world should she resent Fergus setting his blessing, as it were, on her outing with Neville?

Perhaps the fact was, Jeannie told herself flatly, Fergus didn't care what she did, and as he evidently enjoyed children's company, had taken advantage of this to be with them when she was not about... the thorn in his flesh, the constant reminder that she owned Strathlachan, and not himself.

Neville looked even more attractive than he had this morning. Jeannie decided that her distrust of him at first sight was merely because he was so handsome. Women often distrusted handsome men. She met the appreciative glance of the dark blue eyes with equal appreciation.

Neville, helping her on with her coat, said, "We might be fairly late, Fergus. I'm taking her for supper."

Fergus's thick chestnut eyebrows rose.

"Where? You know what this place is like . . . nothing open except some pretty tinny milkbars. Oh, you mean you're taking her home?"

"No. Mother is away, and, as you know, I'm a stickler for propriety." His glance was sardonic. "Haven't you heard about the place at Devastation Creek out towards the Lammerlaws? The pub has branched out— they've put on an annexe for wedding receptions and whatnot. They're calling it Pakiwaitara House. The House of the Legend. It used to be a gay show in the sixties. There was an accommodation house there for the miners. Pretty hot, I believe."

Fergus said drily, "And is this to be conducted on the same lines? Pakiwaitara doesn't only mean legend, I believe. My Maori isn't too hot, but I think the meaning can extend to scandal too."

Neville shook his head. "No. There's quite a good tone about the place. I shan't lead your employer astray, Fergus. They are merely cashing in on history. Just as we expect inns in England to have an Elizabethan air, so this is decorated with pictures of the old gold coaches running under escort, rough and ready miners, etc.

They have pseudo tin pannikins, gold-dust and nuggets in glass cases, a few rusty picks and shovels. Probably bought at the chain stores and left out in the rain, but they've got a sort of Gabriel's Gully air about the whole place. How come you've not heard about it?"

"Been too busy, I suppose. And it's off the main road. Better get Miss Fraser home by midnight."

He had the air of expecting to be obeyed. How strange that Neville did not appear to resent it.

Jeannie thoroughly enjoyed the evening in the little theatre and found the programme excellent, a drama, which was what she liked most. Neville was well known in the township, she realized, though they had not lived there many years, he told her.

She got a surprise to find he was a stock and station agent and lamb buyer. She had imagined him something in the city.

He was aware of her reaction, said solemnly, "There's more to me than you would imagine at first sight, Jeannie Fraser."

She said, changing the subject, "You were wrong about Mr. MacGregor warning me off about you, weren't you?"

He chuckled. "Oh, Fergus and I are old friends. In fact, at one time it looked as if we were going to be related. But, though we are as different as can be, we understand each other."

When they came out Jeannie said, "Perhaps I ought to go home, I don't like keeping my manager up too late. He rises early."

"Oh no, you don't. I must take you to Pakiwaitara House. The only place at all sophisticated around here. I must impress the Aucklanders, you know."

"I'm not an Aucklander. I was born right here in Otago. Dunedin. I wasn't bred here, though. I lived most of my life in Fiji."

The road was rough, climbing a range of mountains, dropping through river-flats, before coming to the township of Devastation Creek, a place of unhappy history, drunken brawls, savage fights, of fortunes won and lost at the throw of a dice, or, in more sinister fashion, because of a knife in the back; a place where once, after a night of quite outstanding debauchery even for the gold-mining days, the creek had suddenly risen and flooded the entire mining camp, leaving death and desolation in its wake.

But now it was a quiet place with hills all about it, long since clothed with green over the scars left by the miners' picks. Farther on was an immense dam which froze solidly in the frosts and brought winter sports enthusiasts from far and near. This was what Pakiwaitara House hoped to cater for. The winter would be its carnival season, its money-making season, not the burning summer of Central Otago.

There was a twenty-first birthday party in full swing, so the smaller room was set aside for casual supper visitors. Jeannie found the atmosphere quite delightful. The air had turned cold outside as it so often did in Central with mountains so near, and there was a fire in the great rough stone fireplace, the leaping flames reflected in the panelling.

"I'll bring you here some time when there is something special on and there is dancing," said Neville.

It seemed a long way to come just for supper, but Neville would look askance at anything Corriefeld had to offer, she realized.

Then home they came through the autumn night brilliant with stars, and here and there a glint of something that betokened winter setting in soon and a hint of frosts to follow. The beauty of it all stirred Jeannie in a way no beauty, not even tropical beauty, had stirred her before. She was conscious of a new awareness, a poignant sense of loneliness. She'd never had time before to long for—well, to long for what? . . . Perhaps for male companionship, for some feeling of working towards a certain fulfilment in life. Not just protecting a young brother and sister, studying ways and means, but experimenting with a side of life which was an unknown quantity to her.

Neville took her to the front door of Strathlachan where the copper lantern had been switched on. He looked at his watch by its light.

"Dead on midnight. My punctuality should satisfy even the austere MacGregor."

Again Jeannie knew faint surprise. It was odd that Neville should look upon Fergus as austere. Certainly if one had not—as she had—surprised him in an off-guard moment he would give that impression. Yet Neville knew of Cecily. She gave it up.

"I won't come in," said Neville. "Thank you for a very pleasant evening, Jeannie. I hope we have many more."

He bent his head, brushed his lips lightly against hers for a moment, laughed and was gone.

Jeannie went in, opened the drawing-room door and saw Fergus, a book in his hands, in one of the deep shabby chintz-covered chairs, his feet up against the brick of the fireplace, pipe in mouth.

She realized he must often have sat like that with Aunt Jean beside him. No wonder he had hoped to buy the place. She knew from others now, besides the solicitor, that he had worked from daylight to dark to make Strathlachan what it was . . . the finest orchard in the district.

He smiled in quite friendly fashion, bringing his feet down and rising.

"Well, you look as if you had quite a pleasant evening."

"I have. A good film and quite an unusual atmosphere at the Pakiwaitara."

"And you found Neville a delightful companion?"

"Yes."

She sat down in the other chair. Fergus resumed his seat.

"I hope I've not kept you up too late, Mr. MacGregor."

"No . . . I'm not an early-to-bedder. I sleep well when I do get to bed, so I can do on short rations. Quality instead of quantity."

Jeannie said idly, "Sounds like an easy conscience."

His tone had an edge to it. "Meaning, I suppose, that I should have a guilty one?"

Her head came up, her hazel-green eyes regarded him in some surprise. "You're reading into an aimless remark a meaning that wasn't meant to be there."



She waited for more hostility, but it didn't come. He smiled suddenly. "I'm sorry. It's because I've resented your holier-than-thou attitude over—over what happened."

She sighed. "Mr. MacGregor, I try to forget that."

"Do you? Why?"

Why? Jeannie herself didn't know the answer to that one. But she did try to forget it, was aware that it took great effort.

Fergus MacGregor repeated his question. "Why, Miss Fraser?"

She hesitated. "Things like that are better forgotten, don't you think?"

He nodded, ramming tobacco into the bowl of his pipe.

In the awkward silence that followed, the kettle on the hob boiled over.

Fergus lifted it off. "I had some supper with the youngsters, but it was so long ago I've forgotten it. Care for a cup with me? Save me making a hot drink back at my place."

Yes, Jeannie would like one. She began to rise.

"No, I'll get it, Miss Fraser. Pity to spoil your night on the tiles with domestic duties, it takes the gilt off."

He went to the kitchen, came back with a tray. He had slices of bread cut, a long toasting-fork. He knelt at the hearth, buttering it hot. It was unbelievably good. Much better than the oyster natties and smoked salmon savouries at the House of the Legend.

"I didn't think I could possibly be hungry," she said to him in a more friendly tone than she had ever used before, taking her second piece.

He had settled back on the hearthrug, his back against the chair he had vacated. Jeannie thought, "I could like this man had I been able to respect him too."

She pulled up her thoughts, sensing danger, and said the first thing that came into her mind.

"There's something familiar about Neville Oliver. It's been tantalizing me as likenesses so often do. I can't place it."

There was a short silence, then Fergus said, "Can't you? It's because despite his dark hair he's very like Cecily."

Jeannie's lips parted, but she couldn't frame the words. Then she managed, "Cecily! But how?"

"They are sister and brother. Didn't you know?"

"How could I? I had no idea where she came from. I only knew her—and that not very well—as Mrs. Owen Chalmers. Mr. Chalmers brought her back as his bride from England on his last trip."

There was no sign of emotion on her manager's face.

"I see. They are comparative newcomers here. Mrs. Oliver and Neville settled here because of his job. It's as good a centre as any, handy to Dunedin and the wool sales, yet not too far from any of the outback places he has to visit. Cecily never lived here. She was in England having surgical treatment when they came to live. But she comes on holiday frequently. It's not too far from Auckland by plane. Deuce of a journey otherwise."

Jeannie said, quite mechanically, "M'm, they tell me it used to be a terrific journey, quite an endurance test, coming down the Main Trunk to Wellington, then on here by steamer and express."

She was merely making conversation, trying not to reveal how dismayed she was at the prospect of Cecily appearing in Corriefield.

"Didn't you come that way? Peter was saying tonight he'd not been in a plane since he lived in Fiji, so I thought you must have come Main Trunk."

"Oh, we had a bit of a holiday first around the North Island. I thought it might be ages before we went up there again. So we did our travelling in bits." It was very nearly the truth. She did not want Fergus suspecting they had run away from their stepfather. As it was, she was only postponing the evil day. It was bound to come out some day. She hoped Cecily Chalmers stayed away from Corriefeld a long time.

She said hastily, "I hope Teresa didn't talk your head off. She's such a chatterbox and has a quite terrific imagination."

"Has she indeed? I wondered. I thought very likely she exaggerated and dramatized the way your stepfather treated you."

Jeannie caught her breath.

He went on, "It's a great pity to let her get away with it if it was so. You know I'm sorry for stepfathers really. It can't be easy to suddenly have to father children not your own, children you haven't had from babyhood, who might possibly resent you in the place of their own father. I think that like mothers-in-law they don't always get a fair deal."

Indignation took the place of caution in Jeannie's mind.

"Fair deal! Our stepfather didn't know the first thing about fairness and justice. He was mean and cruel and hard—even sadistic. Not in a physical way but a mental one. He almost broke Peter's spirit."

Her face had gone quite white.

Fergus, watching it, said, "I'm sorry. I hadn't realized it could have been quite like that. It's always hard to understand anyone else's experience. You might remember that, Miss Fraser, when you sit in judgement on me. And you see, I had the best stepfather that ever walked the earth. We were pals."

Jeannie said nothing, staring into the fire, remembering the wretchedness, the fear and humiliation of those years under Bertram Skimmington's roof.

Fergus MacGregor said, "Just as well then that he died before Peter grew up."

Jeannie was thinking fast, furiously. What should she tell him?

Before she could say anything at all Fergus added in an unexpectedly kind tone, "Perhaps after all I needn't resent the fact that Aunt Jean left you the property. Perhaps you needed it more than I did. You couldn't have kept the family for long without this legacy, could you?"

She said slowly, "It would have been difficult... but I would never have let them go."

"I don't believe you would. But I imagine it must have been devilish hard on a typist's wage."

That, unfortunately, brought them back again to their first meeting, the thing they were trying to forget. Constraint fell upon them again. Fergus MacGregor stood up.

"I must go."

Jeannie said formally, "Thank you for freeing me to go out tonight. I appreciate it."

She went to the back door with him. He opened it, looked out at the night of stars and hills and trees, looked back at her, went to say something, changed his mind, then said in a matter-of-fact tone, "I put a hot water bottle in your bed. Peter was going to, but I said to leave it to me, I thought it would get too cold by the time you got home. However, now it's getting near

winter, and we have such terrific frosts, you would be very wise to go in for electrically heated mattresses. Goodnight."

Jeannie shut the door and stood there, listening to his retreating footsteps on the uneven brick path, the click of the gate, the more muffled sound as he went down the rutted track.

Given different circumstances Fergus MacGregor could have been a good friend to her. As it was she could never wholly trust him. And why, oh, why Cecily's mother and brother have to live, of all places in New Zealand, here in Corriefeld!

She wished now she had told Fergus their stepfather wasn't dead. She hadn't actually told a lie, she reassured herself, merely let his supposition remain uncorrected. But it *was* lying, just the same, and Jeannie felt the same sick distaste she had always felt when, to shield the children from their stepfather's wrath, when they had been up to childish pranks, or even just misunderstood, she had evaded trouble by devious methods.

In any case, she was only postponing the evil day. The whole thing would blow up when Cecily came to Corriefeld, as come she would, some day. She was almost certain to know Jeannie had run away, though she might have been relieved, after that incident, to find her no longer in the office.

Oh well, she must just take each day as it came and hope that if ever it came to a showdown the law might not take Peter and Teresa away from her.

Fergus came into the kitchen the following Saturday morning when the three of them were having a late breakfast. He wanted Jeannie to sign some papers, saying he wanted to get them away when the mailman called.

He looked across at Teresa. "Thought you'd have been having your breakfast off the mantelpiece, young Tess."

It was evidently quite intelligible to Teresa, for she looked up at him and grinned, swallowing some toast. She rose and rubbed her seat reminiscently.

"Oh, it's not too bad, Fergus," she said amicably.

Peter and Jeannie looked mystified. Peter spoke first. "You—you don't mean she's been learning to ride—but where—?"

Both Teresa and Fergus laughed, though Teresa took an anxious look at her sister. But Teresa always told the truth even if it meant shaming the devil.

"He spanked me," she said, waving a hand in Fergus's direction.

Jeannie stared. "He—he sp—"

"Yes. Served me right. I went out on the swamp pool in the leaky old boat. I didn't get far when it started to fill. He hauled me out and walloped me good and proper and then chopped the boat to pieces."

She smiled up at Fergus with sheer affection, even pride.

"Well. . . I'll be . . . I'll be hanged," said Peter. "She liked it!"

"Women always respond to cave-man methods!" said Fergus. "Though she didn't really like it—at the time. You ought to have heard her! In fact I was scared you would. It certainly was good and hard. But Teresa will never go out on the swamp again, will you, my Teresa?"

But he wasn't waiting for her answer, he was watching for Jeannie's reaction. She laughed.

"Well, I'm jolly glad Fergus was the one to see it. I should probably have hauled you to safety and then burst into tears . . . which would only have filled you with a sense of your own importance and egged you on to further ridiculous adventures. It's about time somebody did take you in hand. Tess, I've forbidden you to ever go near the swamp."

"Well," said Teresa darkly, "you'd have been satisfied if you'd heard yon Fergus walloping me. It was a real stramash!"

"It was a real what?"

Fergus burst out laughing. "Haven't you noticed? Teresa is picking up—purposely, I believe—a good many of Lachie's expressions. It's a good old Scots word meaning a disturbance, a tumult. Yes, it was certainly that. I was terrified you'd hear her and have me up for assault. But I was so flaming mad. And I don't care what the psychologists say, a spanking does kids good."

Jeannie was still twinkling. "I want to show you something over at the sheds. I'll walk back with you."

Their errand done, the fault in one of the machines fixed, she looked up to find Fergus's eyes on hers.

"I'm willing to believe you didn't over- paint or over-exaggerate your stepfather's nastiness now," he said.

"Why?"

"I'd quite expected you to fly into a passion over my daring to spank young Tess. I thought perhaps you had resented your stepfather's attempts at discipline, thought that perhaps the children had got out of hand before your mother remarried . . . being without a father, I mean. But evidently you haven't got ideas about self-expression and all that nonsense. In fact, I think you bring the children up very sensibly, and it can't be easy, in single harness."

But it wasn't exactly *sensible*, Jeannie thought, to know this warmth at her heart just because Fergus had praised her . . .

Fergus MacGregor, the man she didn't trust.. ..

The situation between them wasn't as awkward as it had been once, though Jeannie caught herself up several times when she realized she was wondering if, after all, there had been extenuating circumstances. Perhaps she, who had never been in love, should not judge anyone for the unguarded moment, the overwhelming longing, the irresistible tide.

I

It was a school day and Jeannie was alone in the house, knowing it was an easier day in the orchards, when Fergus appeared.

"I've just had a ring from Elizabeth Goldie," he said. "She's been back a week from that North Island lecture tour and says she's ready for visitors

now. She wants me to bring you across for afternoon tea. We needn't go round by the road, we can go up the track through the *kowhais* and birches on the lower slopes of Rocking-horse Hill over to Lavender Hill."

Jeannie had often seen the gracious beauty of Lavender Hill, with its white metalled drive curving up between lavender borders to the lovely mellow old house set against the blaze of colour that was its garden, with an emerald hillside behind it dotted with hydrangeas, rhododendrons, azaleas and heaths. Not all blooming at once, of course, but each adding its own tinge of green to the landscape. It had an orange-tiled roof, black timbers against its white roughcast walls and Virginia creeper blazing against the porches and wreathing about the windows.

It had once been a very ordinary, though well-built home, with fruit orchards on one side, but when Elizabeth Goldie bought it she had sold the land to Aunt Jean and had concentrated on the garden.

Jeannie looked down at her stained jeans. She had been gardening.

"I must change. Will it be a formal call? I mean hat and gloves?"

"No. The track is a bit rough. Wear casual shoes—those green things you had on the other day. The same dress would do . . . that white thing with the green leaves all over it."

Jeannie thought, "Fancy Fergus MacGregor noticing what I wear. And being sort of—sort of brotherly!"

She got out the white cotton frock, clipped a green and gold cummerbund about her small waist, brushed her hair till it shone, was rather more careful than usual about her make-up.

She found she was rather excited. She had read Elizabeth Goldie's books on floral art, on making a garden. Lavender Hill had been familiar to her long before she came to Corriefeld from the illustrations and dust-jackets of her books. Not that she had dreamed it was situated anywhere near her godmother's orchards.

She clasped a white bone necklace from Fiji about her brown throat, clipped a quaint bracelet to match about her wrist, screwed in the earrings. She thought Fergus looked at her appreciatively as they entered the birch glade. It was dappled with sunshine and shadow, with the golden birch

leaves like sovereigns against the sun, the white paths wandering everywhere; some looked as if they went right to the top of the hill.

It seemed odd, walking in friendly fashion with Fergus MacGregor, the manager who at first had resented her, the man she had seen in Owen Chalmers' office, his chin above the ash-golden head of Owen's wife. Jeannie clamped down on that picture. For some reason it now disturbed her more than it did at first.

"I'm quite excited about meeting Elizabeth Goldie. Tell me, what is she like? I can imagine her with patrician features, a rose-petal complexion, violet eyes with shadows under them."

Fergus grinned. "No, she's round-faced and merry. Though goodness knows why."

"What could you mean?"

Fergus hesitated. "Just that those of us who know Elizabeth best realize only too well that she's not had much to be merry about."

"You mean she has had tragedies in her life?"

"No. At least not sudden tragedies. Just a series of minor frustrations, more deadly and soul-destroying than any tragedy probably. At sort of wearing down. Her husband was a spineless creature with a wishbone in place of a backbone. Quite charming . . . went from one job to another all their married life. . . leaning on Elizabeth all the way.

"How she stayed gay and laughing, I don't know. She always reminded me of that saying: 'Werena ma hert licht I wad dee.' I imagine at first it was for the children's sakes. Now it has become a habit, a way of life. You know what her books are like . . . light-hearted, philosophical . . . Well, the children are now launched in life . . . well launched, due solely to Elizabeth. I think she even managed to keep their belief in their father. Never saw him for what he was.

"Finally they took the fruit farm. That suited lazy Larry all right. Elizabeth did all the work, or most of it. And worked on her floral books at night till suddenly they became a great success. She sold the orchard then, concentrated on her garden. Talk about the desert blossoming as the rose . . . that hillside was as yellow and dry as the others till she diverted the stream. I was glad Lawrence died before he went through all her money. So now she



has freedom from want. Her home is beautiful, and she can indulge her good taste. But she must be devilishly lonely. However, it may not be for much longer."

He stopped abruptly there and Jeannie didn't pursue it. It sounded as if there was someone interested.

She said, to change the subject, "What fascinating little paths these are. There has been no time yet to explore them. I must come up here some day. I believe the hill dips down again, then up through some native bush to the top of the Rocking- Horse."

"Yes. The bush is wonderful. So near civilization, yet in its natural state. It's full of birds. But you mustn't go on your own, the bush is too dense. You may not realize how dense our native bush is. You need someone who knows it."

They came to where they could look down on Lavender Hill.

"It's even more lovely than on the dust- jackets," said Jeannie.

They walked down. There were paved paths edged with box and with tiny herbage between the flags, a natural stream running through edged with irises long past blossoming, and with red-hot poker reflecting their flames in the water. Pink belladonna lilies stood under dark-foliaged prunus trees, asters starred the beds, geraniums blazed against the white walls. There were roses of every kind, standard and climbing, alyssum white and lilac and yellow crowding the paths, sweet williams, clove pinks, all the old-fashioned flowers, Canterbury bells, hollyhocks, daisies, cheek by jowl with new and exciting ones. The garden was a singing happiness of bees and birds.

Elizabeth Goldie was in her herb garden, snipping aromatic sprigs with scissors and filling a basket. She had brown smooth hair and serene blue eyes under winged brows and a beautiful disciplined mouth beneath a freckled nose.

How easy to get to know anyone walking around a garden like this, Jeannie thought, with the little stream making cool purling noises and a bell-bird sounding its chimes from a red gum on the hillside.

The interior of the house was as delightful as the outside. There was a perfect blending of dark polished traditional furniture, and here and there a room featuring the modern trend.

They had their afternoon tea on the west loggia, screened from a too hot sun by creepers; Virginia creeper, wistaria, clematis.

Suddenly Jeannie said, leaning forward, "Mrs. Goldie, would you allow me to sketch this corner of the loggia? I would love to. With just a hint of this orange basketwork table and the china on it. And those concrete flower troughs at the edge of the terrace spilling over with the sun plants."

Elizabeth sprang up, went through to her study, returned with plain white paper, pencils. She and Fergus, to Jeannie's relief, left her to it. Jeannie stood out on the path, instantly absorbed in getting her impression of that corner on to paper.

As she returned, Elizabeth said, "Have you any inhibitions about showing it to us? I mean some artists don't like to till the finishing touches are done."

Jeannie shrugged. "No, I'm not in the least temperamental."

Elizabeth took it, looked with interest, then more closely, even intensely.

She lifted her face and the blue eyes were shining.

"Jeannie! I mean, Miss Fraser, you're a gift from the gods. I've always suffered from not having anyone on hand to illustrate my stuff. I can't draw a line. I photographed my arrangements . . . but I'm never quite satisfied. This is lighter, more artistic. You do pen-and-ink drawings... for reproduction? You could do them for me? That would be wonderful. Would you?"

Jeannie said slowly, "I would love to, of course. If you think my style would suit you."

"Suit me . . . it's heavenly. Oh, Jeannie, it's no good. I can't go on calling you Miss Fraser—you'd be an answer to prayer. I would like the beginnings and endings of my chapters illustrated. I could imagine the delightful tail-pieces you would be able to do. And you're right next door. Any time I wanted you to sketch a flower arrangement you could come right over."

Fergus sighed heavily to attract their attention.

"Might I mention we fruit-farm for our living? You know, Elizabeth Goldie, you have a way with you. I suppose it would be all the same if Miss

Fraser and I were in the middle of packing cherries for a flight to Auckland. She'd have to tear over here to start sketching some wretched agapanthus or other."

Elizabeth laughed, taking him mock- seriously. "I shall be most considerate. I shall ring up first, before arranging my flowers, and ask when your employer would be free and if you would allow her an hour off. I daresay even owners are allowed a little free time!"

Elizabeth dimpled, looking audacious. She was utterly charming, thought Jeannie, watching fascinated, yet she must be every bit of forty-seven.

Fergus said, giving her a reproving look that made Jeannie realize what close friends they were, "Have you heard from Rossiter Forbes lately? Where is he now?"

Jeannie thought that Elizabeth's tone was a little flat. Or perhaps not quite that, but forced to be casual.

"He's in Sweden. I had another card from him yesterday. I'll let you see it."

Fergus said quickly, "Oh, there's no need, Elizabeth."

She looked at him in a way Jeannie thought odd. "It's not in the least private. Anyone could read it. In fact the mailman probably has. He never writes a letter, just card after card."

Fergus said easily, "Oh, some of us are poor correspondents."

A light, inconsequential conversation, yet Jeannie had the queer feeling that it was important. Or was she getting imaginative? Why should her perceptions be suddenly heightened, anyway? Because they were. Jeannie's mind shied away from the answer to that. It wasn't wise to analyse one's real reasons for suddenly finding the grass was brighter green, the skies bluer, the birds' song sweeter. . . .

They didn't stay long. Presently, all too soon, Fergus said, "Well, we must away," and they went homeward again, up the sunbaked hillside.

She thought he must have work waiting, but when they rounded the first shoulder Fergus said, pausing at a track that led upward, "Well, you wanted to climb the hill . . . why not now? We may not get another chance soon ... or the weather may change."

Jeannie's heart was light as they climbed. This was turning out better than she had expected. Something of their enmity had disappeared. She was almost ready to stop resenting that moment of discovery in the Auckland office, to start finding reasons for it, perhaps a last goodbye ... to stop condemning\_\_\_\_\_

"We'll only go as far as the top of the first knoll today. The other is an endurance test . . . you'll need slacks, old ones, and heavy shoes for that. As it is, there's a little native bush on the crown of this, but it's not nearly as dense or as steep as the other. That one, in spots, you have to force your way through on hands and knees. Great fun."

Gradually the track narrowed, the bush closed in, the birches giving place to native bush and thick undergrowth. Finally the track disappeared altogether.

"We don't come up here often enough. Too busy a time in the orchard," said Fergus. "The bush so greedily closes in again." He turned to her. "It will be a bit of a scramble up the last slope, we'll have to swing ourselves up by native fuchsias and tree-ferns. You could get held up on that bangle and wrench your arm. Let me take it off for you."

Jeannie felt furious with herself, for he was so casual, and she had to force herself to control her breathing. She felt her pulses race at the touch of his cool hands against her wrist. He dropped it into his pocket. "I'll take your earrings too, you might lose them." He carefully unscrewed them, dropped his fingers to the fastening of her necklace. He added in a matter-of-fact tone, turning away a little in the tiny clearing just big enough for the two of them, "And slip off your nylons. They'd be ruined."

She undipped her suspenders, drew the stockings off, gave them to him.

Entering the bush, they were shut into a green twilit world of their own. It was hard to believe it was still afternoon, and to believe that the going on the higher hill could be worse.

She was glad of Fergus's hand to help her up the worst bits. Stones rolled, vines twisted and clung. They had to free each other several times. But it wasn't far to the top and they were out into the sunlight on a bare tussocky hillside.

Panting, they flung themselves down below a rock, disturbing sunning lizards, and lay there exhausted for a few moments before sitting up to take in the view.

Fergus pointed it all out, every range, every peak. There was the shimmering river threading through its steep gorges like a green ribbon; the craggy hills with the out-croppings of schist rock, the inevitable sheep, the flaming gorse, the heathery *manuka*, hillside after hillside and all the flats covered with marching, symmetrical rows of leafless fruit trees, promise of abundance to come.

Presently they fell to talking of Elizabeth.

"She is, as you said, round-faced and merry. But you can tell she has suffered. Her eyes. . . serene, yet you have the feeling that it's serenity won at a cost."

He looked a little surprised at this evidence of perspicacity.

"You're right. She did achieve serenity . . . in spite of everything. But at present Elizabeth worries me. She deserves more from life than life has given her. She has given herself, royally and with both hands. I don't mean it owes her anything materially. She's got that now, has earned it herself. I mean emotionally. Under the serenity is a disciplined restlessness, a wondering." He bit at a tussock stalk impatiently and threw it away. "What has got into Rossiter Forbes, I don't know. *Cards*. And not even in an envelope! Yet I could have sworn ..."

Jeannie kept quiet. It was almost as if Fergus MacGregor was talking to himself.

"Rossiter Forbes has been a widower for a year. He was married to a pampered, selfish, spoiled woman. It must have been ghastly for him, but he was as brave in his own way as Elizabeth. Perhaps I imagined the whole thing. I've no real basis for imagining there was ever anything between them ... they were both too fine to ever play ducks and drakes with their marriages. Only once I saw them exchange a look. What a look that was. What a mess life can be sometimes!"

Jeannie still said nothing. She sat perfectly still. What irony!—*Too fine to play ducks and drakes with their marriages*. What a comment to come from Fergus MacGregor, who was a threat to Owen Chalmers' marriage. . . .

Suddenly Fergus swung round on her, the brows down over the blue eyes, eyes that looked almost black in this mood.

"But what am I saying this to you for ... of all persons?"

Jeannie had been lying back on one elbow. She stared up at him, bewildered.

"Why not to me?"

"Because *you'd* never understand anything like that, would you, Miss Fraser? Never understand tides of feeling that run strongly? You like everything sewn up into little watertight compartments surrounded by Thou shalt nots.' I shouldn't talk to you like this about Elizabeth. I might give you the wrong idea about her. You might judge her as immoral on the strength of one unguarded look I saw her give Rossiter years ago when they were both struggling against frightful odds. You might even think there was more in it than that, and I know damned well there wasn't!"

Jeannie was past words, gazing up at him. His furious face, dark with feeling, was close above hers.

"What can *you* know of other people's temptations . . . with your little plaster saint face and your unwritten forehead? You've never gone beyond the bounds of family affections. You need experience, Miss Fraser ... something to take away that un- kissed look ... to make you realize there's more to life than tepid affections. You're even a danger to yourself as you are ... untried and all simplicity. Neville Oliver will teach you if I don't ... so ... here goes."

The next moment he had crushed his mouth down on hers. His fingers, gripping her arms, were digging mercilessly into the soft flesh. Jeannie felt paralysed. Worse than that, though insulted, she knew, unwelcome though the knowledge was, that she didn't want to move. His lips were demanding, bruising. Jeannie willed herself not to respond, hated herself because everything within her, feelings she had never before been conscious of, wanted to respond, to cling, to return.

Fergus took his mouth from hers, looked down on her with an unfathomable look, laughed.

Jeannie would have liked to smack his face for the laugh alone.

There was triumph in his tone. "Not such an iceberg as you look, are you, Miss Fraser? If you really let yourself go you could be quite . . . something."

Jeannie was glad her colour did not rise. She was beyond mere embarrassment. She summoned all her reserves. She even achieved a cool, amused laugh.

"I am afraid you're not as omniscient as you think you are, Mr. MacGregor. I may have looked unkissed.. . but that wasn't so. And as far as Neville Oliver is concerned, you're already a little late. I know one isn't supposed to kiss and tell, but can you really imagine Neville saying goodnight to a woman with a handshake? And apart altogether from that, it would take a very different man from you to rouse me. Your technique is quite faulty, you know. A woman needs to be wooed before she can respond."

His face was wearing its habitual mask again, but Jeannie felt she had indeed scored. She didn't know where the knowledge had come from. It was instinctive, she supposed.

She added, "I know you resent me, Mr. MacGregor, but after the friendly afternoon we shared at Mrs. Goldie's I thought you were forgetting your animosity towards me just as I was forgetting my distrust of you. Perhaps it's just as well it happened. It puts me on my guard. But keep your dislike of me within bounds, won't you? I don't particularly care for the weapons you use. I've never much admired brute strength."

"No?" the sardonic brows were overworking themselves again. He did not look in the least ashamed. "But then you don't need to worry about weapons, do you? You have the supreme one in your keeping."

"What?"

"Dismissal. What else would I mean?"

He waited, his eyes holding hers. They measured glances. Jeannie made her gesture of washing her hands again, a gesture of distaste.

"Oh, that. What—what just happened between us had nothing to do with employer and employee. I should scorn to be petty. You need never be afraid I should use that advantage over you unfairly, Mr. MacGregor—for dealing with something that was entirely personal. The only reason I would ever

have to dismiss you would be if I became dissatisfied with your work. There is a principle involved."

His lip curled. "Oh, the self-righteousness of you. The priggishness! Am I supposed to admire that?"

Her tone was weary. "I'm not looking for admiration, merely doing what I feel to be right. If you like to sneer at it I can't stop you. I would like to make my way home myself. In future let our dealings be strictly confined to business."

"Very well, but you're not going through the bush alone. It's too dangerous. You could break a leg. You'll have to put up with my company—even my help—till we get down."

She made no issue of it. They exchanged no words at all. Jeannie had an iron grip on herself, didn't allow herself any feeling as at the times when it was necessary, Fergus took her arm or her hand to help her down.

Once they took a wrong turning and came to a steep face, a rocky cliff overhung with scrub and vines. Fergus broke the silence.

"We can't go back. I'll go first, but it's too high for you to scramble down. You'll have to jump. I'll catch you."

She jumped. He caught her, released her instantly.

Suddenly they were through the bush. They had come out farther down, there was just a short distance to traverse under the birches and *kowhais*, and they came to where the track branched, one going to Fergus's house, one to hers.

"Good afternoon," said Jeannie lightly.

"Good afternoon," he returned. And went on his way.

Jeannie, to convince herself of something, she wasn't sure what, made quite a ritual of washing her face well. So much for Fergus MacGregor's kiss, that was to teach her so much!

Jeannie Fraser lay awake a long time that night. She had put the disturbing experience away from her while she cooked the tea, washed the dishes, supervised the homework, but now she faced it. She struggled against the conclusion she came to, but at last, in the wee sma's, when the truth just had



to be faced, she admitted to herself that rightly or wrongly, in spite of all she knew about him, she loved Fergus MacGregor.

If this were love . . . this tide of sweetness that was taking possession of all of her at the remembered vigour of his kiss ... the feelings that urged her to respond, the primitive, pulsing feeling, the awakening of a passion within that she had not known existed till then. The awareness of her femininity, the force of the urge to return Fergus's embrace, the queer odd thrill at being conquered by a masterful male. With it all, the humiliation of knowing she had judged Fergus MacGregor from an inexperience that had known nothing of what it meant to love.

When at last she did sleep it was to awake unrefreshed, with the memory of yesterday's humiliation washing back over her and making her wonder just how she was to get through the day. She and her manager worked together so closely now that most of the seasonal workers had departed.

She decided not to go over to the sheds. If he needed her he could ring. The children had no sooner got away on the school bus than the phone did ring. Jeannie picked it up, moistening her lips nervously, but it was Neville.

"Good morning, Jeannie, my sweet."

Jeannie laughed from pure relief.

"Good ... I expected a reproof from my straitlaced new acquaintance for that endearment. You're improving."

"It's not that," said Jeannie severely. "It's just that I've realized it's no use taking you seriously."

"That," said Neville, "is not a compliment. But no matter, the thing is I'm off for Dunedin. In about half an hour. How about it? I've business there, but you could shop, or prowl. And don't say you can't come, you're too busy, because I've already rung Fergus and he says he can get on quite well without you today." (Jeannie thought that was probably more true than Neville suspected.) "And further objections being anticipated, Lachie has offered to give the youngsters their tea and they can both stay down with him till we get home."

Jeannie would be glad to be out of Corriefeld today, so her tone was warm.

"Neville, I'd love it. I'll be ready. Half an hour, did you say?"

She dressed in the green Heathery suit, delighting in the feel of the good tweed, adjusted a soft pull-on hat to her brown curls. She decided on driftwood shoes, and a bag to match.

Fergus was at the mail-box at the gate when they came down to it. He had a sheaf of letters in his hand, some opened.

His greeting was casual, giving no hint of any recollection of their clash yesterday.

"I opened these right away in case there was anything needing your attention, Miss Fraser, but it can all wait."

Neville had got out of the car and had gone to the boot at the back to check a rattle that seemed to be coming from there. Fergus MacGregor's eyes met Jeannie's. She tried to make hers quite blank.

He said abruptly, "Did you know Owen Chalmers is ill?"

Jeannie caught her breath. "Ill? you mean very ill?"

"Yes. Heart. He's in a private hospital in Auckland, having a complete rest. It's touch and go."

Neville slammed the boot, came back to them.

Fergus said, "Well, so long. Don't hurry back. Cheerio."

The meeting Jeannie had dreaded was over. But there were new thoughts to occupy her mind. Oddly enough the one that seemed to matter most was that Cecily must have let him know immediately. It made Jeannie feel a little sick. Owen Chalmers ill, perhaps mortally so, and Cecily wrote straight away to tell the man she loved that her elderly husband was dying. That was what it amounted to. Jeannie felt a scorn rise within her, for Cecily, for Fergus, for herself who had been foolish enough to fall in love with a man like that.

She sighed.

Neville's hand left the wheel and patted hers as it lay on her lap.

"Sigh no more, lady. Today is ours. Not a day for sighing. No compliment to an escort to have the lady sighing. If you have some deep-rooted heartache, confide in me. I'm even good at mopping up tears. But if it was just tiredness I'll forgive you."

"That's all it was," declared Jeannie briskly. "I'm as ready as you are for fun, Neville."

He took a quick look at her. "Good. I was just a bit afraid you were going to be too sober. Though it whetted my curiosity. I felt that wakened up you might really be something."

Resentment stirred in Jeannie, disturbing her with memories of yesterday. Fergus had called her a little plaster saint. It sounded dull. Did she really give that impression? She might well at that. The years of discipline had perhaps become a habit.

She lifted her golden-brown lashes, swept Neville a glance that was purely provocative.

"I might surprise you yet," she warned. "You don't know me very well."

"But I have a great ambition to do so," said Neville, hiding his surprise.

Jeannie gave herself over to the surface delight of the day.

Neville knew far more about the history of the places they passed than Jeannie had imagined he would. She said so, rather naively.

He shot her a rueful glance. "I told you there was more to me than appeared on the surface. My dear, I'm a lamb buyer. A country bumpkin. Odd, ain't it? You'd expect me to be a dress designer ... a city slicker?"

Jeannie had obviously to struggle to answer him. He laughed.

"Having a spot of bother, aren't you? Endeavouring to combine truth with tact. Don't, you'll find it a fearful strain. But I'm not quite a lounge lizard."

Jeannie still couldn't find words. He went on, "I've lived on the surface of things. I admit that. In point of fact Mother spoiled us both, my sister and myself. You'll realize that if you ever meet Cecily." Jeannie caught her breath. Should she tell him that—?

"Cecily may come to her senses some day. I wonder. She married for money. Now as for me, I'd not do that.. . though I might be tempted to marry where money was." He was laughing, and Jeannie laughed with him.

"And you?" she asked. "Have you come to your senses? Or do you only intend to when you feel the time is opportune?"

He said, and his tone was serious, "I've sowed my wild oats. Might as well admit it. But perhaps there is enough of my father in me—who loved the land—to act as a saving grace. But I came to my senses only recently. The day I met you, in fact."

Jeannie was startled. Her eyes swept up to his face. Then she laughed.

"I don't take you seriously," she reminded him.

They stopped at several farms on the way in, lovely prosperous-looking farms tucked snugly into the sheltered folds of the tawny hills. She wondered idly if Neville Oliver could be described as having a split personality. With the farmers he threw off that frivolous skin, became one of them.

He insisted on Jeannie accompanying him. Some of the farmers they had to find in the paddocks, running Neville's luxurious car over rough tracks, and sometimes no tracks at all. Once they came into a wool-shed, where the farmer and his son were hoisting sheep into cradles where they lay on their backs, waving pathetically helpless legs in the air while the son, as he said, cut their toe-nails.

Jeannie was completely fascinated by the apparent ease with which the men handled the heavy animals, the docility of the sheep once they were on their backs, the professional way the farmer and his son trimmed the hooves. Jeannie could see when it was pointed out to her how the hard horny substance could bend over and cripple them.

She saw them looking between the hooves for signs of foot-rot, treating what they found. She suddenly realized how complicated sheep-farming could be, what hazards there were, what highly technical treatments were involved, and looked with immense respect at the vast array of lotions and medicines, drenches and syringes on the shelves of the woolshed.

It seemed so odd to Jeannie, watching Neville with his immaculate and debonair air, to realize he knew as much about stock as the farmers; in fact he could even advise them on some things.

She wondered as they sped on their way again if it was possible that there was also in Cecily some of the more admirable qualities? Might they be revealed during Owen Chalmers' illness? Jeannie became aware that that was wishful thinking and she frowned. How wasteful of emotion to wish Cecily and Owen to draw together. It was tantamount—if she was honest with herself—to hoping Cecily might stay out of Fergus MacGregor's life.

Then they were dipping down into Dunedin which lay bathed in sunshine, the incredibly lovely outline of the peninsula hills girdling the harbour, the open sea beyond, the belts of native bush cutting through the suburban streets, hinting at dene and dell, sweet with fragrance and bird-song.

First Church steeple rose graciously against a sapphire sky, masts of shipping showed against it too. They ran through Princes Street to the Octagon where Robbie Burns looked out over this new Edinburgh in the southern hemisphere.

"Dinner first . . . we'll have it at the Savoy. I must brush up and wash first, though. I smell of sheep."

Jeannie went round to see her solicitor, professed herself more than satisfied with the way the orchard was run, fixed up a few details of business, then departed to do the shops.

She felt in a reckless mood, spurred on by the novelty of a cheque book, and bought lavishly. Some of the things she doubted if she would need much in Corriefeld, but after being starved of such things she would get a thrill just to open her wardrobe and see them hanging there.

In one shop she changed into a new purchase . . . delighting in a brown and amber frock of rich silk with a draped neckline. Jeannie chose a soft amber woollen coat to go with it and a big hat.

Neville had asked her to meet him at the Stock Exchange. They would have dinner at the Law Courts Hotel and then drive the hundred odd miles home at leisurely pace. That, no doubt, was why Jeannie bought the new outfit. She took a taxi along to the Exchange with her parcels.

Neville's practised eye approved the change, the green shoes, the matching bag.

But he said gloomily, "Of all things there was a message from Mother. She's been in Auckland, you know. There was a wire delivered from her just after we left. She's arriving on the next plane at Taieri Airport. We'll have to step on it. She gets in at six-thirty. She's been staying with Cecily, my sister."

Jeannie laughed. "What odds? It doesn't matter, Neville. Let's just get going."

"It does matter. What fellow wants to take a chaperon along?"

They took steep Stuart Street out of the town, dipped down into Kaikorai Valley, then up through Wakari over Three Mile Hill with its pine and larch forestry down to the Taieri Plains.

Jeannie had expected a faded edition of Cecily, perhaps, or a smart, well-preserved woman with Neville's clear-cut features. Mrs. Oliver was only one degree removed from dowdiness.

She was plain, sensible-looking, with a no-nonsense air about her. What a bewildering, fascinating family! But she had a certain poise and assurance about her for all her lack of style. She met Jeannie without fuss or surprise, probably being used to Neville producing girls she didn't know.

She had very little luggage. Neville said, "We're dining at the Law Courts Hotel, Mother."

She said, "Sorry, we aren't. We're dining with the Rosenbergs. I rang them from Wellington. I said you would be meeting me."

Neville laughed, a laugh with a note of exasperation in it. "You have a touching faith in me, haven't you, pet! I might have been up at Queenstown when you wired. As it was, I was in Dunedin, and Fergus had no end of fuss to contact me."

Jeannie said nervously, "They won't be expecting me. Perhaps I should have dinner in town. I shouldn't mind."

Mrs. Oliver brushed that aside. "Knowing Neville, they wouldn't be a bit surprised—or put out. He usually has some damsel in tow."

Neville said in Jeannie's ear, but not in a very low voice, "You see ... Mother is as bad as I am at dropping bricks. But there's often purpose behind her remarks. She's warning you off not to take me seriously."

"Neville," said his mother, "you do talk a lot of nonsense. Finish stowing the bags in the boot and let's be on our way. Miss Fraser looks the kind I'd be glad to have you serious about."

"Good lord," said Neville, dutifully following out his mother's instructions, "she's fallen for you too! What incredible luck!"

Jeannie thought, with an insight which surprised her, that Mrs. Oliver was probably as materially minded as her daughter, and if Neville's taste usually ran to the more flamboyant—as it probably had—then perhaps she thought someone with a fruit orchard was more eligible than most!

The Rosenbergs were delightful people, who welcomed Jeannie cordially. They had teenage sons and one daughter, and their home was both exquisite and homely.

Jeannie found she was enjoying herself and was more glad than ever she had worn the new things. She saw Neville's eyes rest on her appreciatively once or twice.

But they spent more time over their meal, naturally, than if they had dined at the hotel. Jeannie said to Neville under cover of the conversation when they were sitting around the fire having coffee, "Neville, I hate to break things up, but it will make it woefully late for the children down with Lachie and Mr. MacGregor if we don't leave soon."

He smiled quite a nice smile at her. "Yes. I'll get Mother going soon."

He stood up. "Sorry to break up the party, but we have a hundred miles to go. Mother, no prolonged farewells."

But it was still later than Jeannie liked. The conversation on the way home was more between mother and son. Cecily's name cropped up frequently. That was only natural.

"Poor Cecily," said Mrs. Oliver. "She isn't used to illness and it upsets her. Owen wanted to stay home, to have a nurse, but I could see it was too much for my girl. So we put him into a private hospital. He has every care and attention. And it's not so dull for Cecily."

Jeannie found her eyes misting over. Owen Chalmers had always loved his home. What a fine woman his first wife had been. She remembered Owen nursing her at home in her last illness.

They saw the lights on in Fergus MacGregor's home as they swept up the drive. Neville stopped on the circular car drive at the front. He just waited till he heard the door open, then drove away.

It was Lachie who opened it.

"Oh, come awa' in, Lassie. I'll tak' ye up the hill. Fergus went up there and let the young ones get off to bed. They were tired out."

Jeannie felt apologetic. She began to explain.

Lachie waved the explanations away. "Och, it's of no matter. Only that Fergus thocht ye'd be better pleased if they were bedded down at their usual time. I'll get ma torch."

He left her at the brick path, saying he'd away back and get to bed himself. Jeannie wished he'd waited for Fergus. She didn't want a tete-a-tete with her manager tonight. Not after yesterday.

Fergus was in front of the kitchen range, reading. He looked up, but before she could say anything there came an unmistakable woof from inside the house. She lifted her head, staring.

"What in the—"

"Come and see," said Fergus calmly. Bewildered, Jeannie followed him. He opened Peter's door, switched on the light. A black streak flung itself against Jeannie, reached up to her face, licked it, fell down, leaped up again.

Peter sat up in bed, his shining eyes confirming what Jeannie was trying to realize.

"It *is* Mick," he said.

Jeannie went down on her knees, heedless of her new finery, fondling and patting the big black retriever. He rolled over on his back, waving his paws in the air, his eyes imploring her to scratch his tummy.

She looked up. "But wh—who—I mean how—?"

Peter said, "Fergus sent for him. Wasn't i hat beaut, Sis? Had him freighted down by air so that he wouldn't have a long, frightening journey. Fergus went right up to Taieri today and got him from the airport so he shouldn't have to be railed here."

He added, "I'd told Fergus about Mick once. Said our stepfather hadn't liked dogs so we had sent him to the Benningtones at Hawke's Bay. Fergus asked who had taken him. I thought he was just interested because it was another fruit-farm. Fergus rang them up, right from here, and asked if the dog had settled, whether they thought he would stand another change, and sent for him. I didn't know. Fergus got back with him just after we got in from school. Gosh, it was super."

Jeannie suddenly felt deathly tired from her emotions. They were all such mixtures—Neville, his mother, Fergus. Why did Fergus MacGregor have to do kindly things like this? Why, because convention demanded it, did she have to be put in the position where she must thank him? So much the better if she had been able to detest him unreservedly. Her brain was whirling.



She was glad for Peter's sake more than she could say. She would never forget the young lad's utter desolation when he himself had decided for Mick's sake that the dog must be sent out of reach of Bertram's ready boot and snarling voice.

She got the dog and boy settled again. Peter said, raising himself on one elbow, "Aren't you going to thank Fergus, Jeannie?"

She gave a faint smile. "Yes. I'll thank him out in the kitchen. Time you settled down, Peter. We'll fix up a kennel tomorrow."

"It's fixed. Fergus had it ready. But I kept him in tonight."

Jeannie preceded Fergus to the kitchen, laid her new bag and gloves down on the table, turned to face him.

He laughed. "Goes against the grain to thank me, doesn't it, Miss Fraser? Be much less complicated if I was completely unfeeling, wouldn't it? Harsh as well as unchivalrous."

She said evenly, "I'm glad you realize your—your behaviour yesterday was unchivalrous. But my education is progressing in leaps and bounds. Life in this small village is vastly more exciting than I thought. There's much material here for any student of psychology. Even Neville is greatly different from what I thought at first."

"What did you think at first, Miss Fraser?"

"That he was merely the dilettante type. A lightweight. I find he has more in him than I realized. Our calls at the various sheep stations convinced me of that. The farmers place great store on his opinions." She hesitated, then because the desire to wound as she had been wounded triumphed over her better feelings, she added, "I should imagine he has much more depth of character than his sister."

She saw the flesh tighten and whiten over the prominent cheekbones. But he merely said lightly, "You could be right." He added, mockingly, "You appear to be gaining experience fast."

She shrugged. "Yes. And I find it more pleasant to learn from—Neville."

She lifted the boiling kettle, rinsed out the teapot. Fergus MacGregor watched her.

"Punctilious, aren't you? Must be hospitable. Yet you have the air of wishing you could drop a little arsenic in."

"Oh no." Her tone was light, indifferent. "My feelings about you aren't as strong as that, but we must observe the conventions. Besides, I feel like a cup of tea myself after such a drive."

After that conversation languished. They drank it in silence. An odd thing about silence—it could be so intimate, so fraught with companionship, or, as now, charged with hostility.

As Jeannie let him out of the back door she said, "But I do thank you—quite sincerely—for getting Peter's dog for him. It was a kindly thought."

"Thank you, Miss Fraser." His voice was ironical, amused. He added, "It would have been more natural had *you* thought of getting the dog down."

Jeannie shut the door, stood there, gazing unseeingly at it.

She had longed to send for Mick, but had been afraid to make the contact in case any word of it should get back to their stepfather. Not that it was likely, but though she doubted if he even remembered the name of the people they had stayed with at Hawke's Bay, she would not risk it. The horrible coincidence of finding her manager to be none other than the man she had surprised in her employer's office had increased her apprehension a hundredfold.

She decided now that she had better write to the Benningtons, tell them she had fled Auckland, and ask them not to reveal their whereabouts should they be questioned.

Jeannie, weary now to the point of nausea, went to bed.

**S**UDDENLY they became part and parcel of the small community. There was to be a full-scale concert in aid of building the memorial hall, a project started some time ago. The Dramatic Society was putting on a two-act play for it under the production of a Workers' Educational Association tutor. Jeannie turned down the chance of joining it, but Peter came home one day to say he'd told them she was a wizard at designing scenery.

"They leapt at it, Jeannie. I thought it would give you a chance to do some of your own work again, the work you love best."

He said this in the packing shed in front of Fergus.

Jeannie said, "Oh no, Peter—I—"

Fergus interrupted, "Peter, you ought to know by now that your sister has no intention of joining in the township affairs. She prefers just to make her living out of the district."

Jeannie went scarlet, bit her lip. Peter looked startled, since to him Fergus was as friendly as an older brother.

How could she explain her reasons for remaining without the closer-knit township life? She still had the dread that if she mixed too much sooner or later she would be found out. If you went into drama there was always the chance your name would be reported in the paper, perhaps copied into some national weekly.

She sought for speech. Fergus said to Peter, "Skip it, will you? I'd like a few words with your sister on her own."

Peter went. A wish from his idol was sufficient. Jeannie said to Fergus as soon as Peter was out of earshot, "Mr. MacGregor—I fail to see that—"

He finished it for her. "That this is any of my business."

"Exactly. And if you know it so well that you can even anticipate my reaction— my very words—why do you bother to interfere?"

"The lord knows ... I don't. I certainly stick my neck out, don't I? But your godmother was a friend to all the community, helped with everything. It's letting Strathlachan down to start with. For another thing—you've already been commented on as stand-offish. Even the fact that you go round with nobody but Neville is nothing in your favour. I heard it said the other day that you thought yourself superior, coming from Auckland. And, as Neville is comparatively a newcomer, and sophisticated to boot, it's said you're more his type than theirs."

Jeannie was scornful. "As if that matters! This is nothing but the gossip of a tuppenny- ha'penny village."

He nodded. "But you live here. Get your living from its soil. And public opinion does matter." For a moment a wry amusement twisted his lips. "As I do so well know. Everyone should pull their weight in a community, no matter how small that community is. For instance this Memorial Hall. It will be a fine building, capable of taking not only the population of Corriefeld but all the surrounding district. By having accommodation like that we hope

to be able to attract good musicians, singers, overseas talent, repertory groups from some of the larger centres.

"Maybe you do despise the country entertainments, I don't wonder at that when you lived in Auckland, but Dunedin is too far for you to take Peter and Tess very often to see or hear those things which will add to their culture. You'll be glad to have them hear the people we hope to attract, even if you yourself think it more exciting to get Neville to take you to town. So you ought to do your whack towards making this concert a success."

Jeannie went on putting the late peaches into the grader. She said nothing.

Fergus sighed. "All right. It doesn't matter. No one really relishes advice."

Jeannie looked up directly into his eyes. "It does matter. I—I know we're at cross purposes over many things, Mr. MacGregor, but in this, at least, I think you're right."

She paused, momentarily halted by the strange light that leaped into the blue eyes.

"My reasons were not snobbish ones. Not in the least." She suddenly laughed. "I certainly wasn't contrasting the gaiety and sophistication of Auckland against Corriefeld. Auckland can't hold a candle to it . . . in *my* eyes. I'm all for the far, lonely places, not for city streets. I didn't see anything much up there. It was all work and no play.

"It isn't easy to run a house and a job, and I made all Teresa's dresses as well as mine. I could afford the material, nothing more. I had reasons you wouldn't dream of for not joining in here. But perhaps they're not as important as I thought, and I've been mistaken in keeping aloof. Only—I don't drive yet, and I can't see Neville entering much into Corriefeld activities."

Fergus said, "But he will—now."

"Why? Oh, you mean—"

"Exactly. I imagine that where you are, there we are likely to find Neville. But if not—"

"If not... ?" she prompted him, her eyes watchful.

"Then I'll take you myself."

Her tone was as mocking as his so often was. "But how magnanimous, Mr. MacGregor. You must be keen on this concert and its aim to offer to escort someone you—detest!"

She had flung the word out as a challenge. They both were aware of that.

He looked at her curiously. "Do you really believe that?"

A wave of wistfulness swept Jeannie. She would have liked him to have stated what he really felt. To deny he detested her. To ...

"What else am I to believe?" she asked. "Our association was ill-fated from the start."

"It's not you I detest," he said slowly, "but I do detest the way you—"

Perhaps he was seeking for words, careful to say something that would neither wound nor sound insincere, but suddenly Jeannie remembered that as soon as Owen Chalmers had been taken seriously ill Cecily had let him know. So she gathered up the condemnation that was her only defence against loving him and said, "You detest the way I found you out."

He took a step towards her, seized her arm, but with a twist Jeannie was free. "No!" she said. "I don't want any more experience, thank you. One can pay too dearly for knowledge." And she was gone, out into the clear golden sunlight of an autumn day.

She expected after that that he would let the matter drop, but he appeared at seven that night, tapping on the back door lightly and walking in.

The children were doing their homework at the table, and Jeannie was sitting sewing at her machine.

"Oh, good evening, Miss Fraser. I told them you were willing to help them with the scenery, so they would like you along tonight. Can you be ready in a quarter of an hour? Lachie is coming up to stay with the children. I'm calling for Elizabeth too. Her car is in dock."

Jeannie swallowed. "All right. I didn't realize Elizabeth was in the Drama Group. But after this perhaps I could just go with her when her car is fixed. It would save taking you out."

"I'm in the Drama Group."

Jeannie stared. "Why, Fergus, I can't imagine you in drama." She stopped short, aware of two things. One that she had used his christian name, the other that it was scarcely a tactful thing to say.

It appeared that he hadn't noticed the former and didn't care about the latter.

"When you see me in action," he said in the friendly, careless tone he used in front of the children, "you will realize I'm second only to Dustin Hoffman."

Between Elizabeth and Jeannie was springing up a firm friendship, despite the difference in their ages. There was an affinity between them that was to do with their shared artistic tastes, but mainly because fundamentally they were akin.

Elizabeth was waiting at the gate, a blue misty scarf tied over her hair, in dark slacks and short blue jacket.

"She can come in the front seat with us," said Fergus as they drew up. "You'll have to move nearer me." He glanced down, and the corner of his mouth twitched. "Even if you do find that distasteful."

Jeannie couldn't answer that because Elizabeth was opening the offside door. That was just as well, because she wanted to answer that amused gleam in his eye with something equally light and bantering, and it was better not. Wiser to have him think she preferred him at a distance.

Wasn't it odd, thought Jeannie, squashed in beside someone who didn't matter to you, you didn't think about anything else except that it was a trifle uncomfortable. Here, now, Fergus's nearness was accelerating her pulse. She was acutely conscious of the warmth of his thigh against hers, the feel of his shoulder by her shoulder. It made a languorous warmth steal over her; she shut her eyes in the friendly darkness, wondering what it would be like, since even this was bliss, to be shut into his arms, to be kissed by Fergus, not as she had been kissed there on the sun-baked hillside, in anger and against her will, but kissed lovingly, with the confidence of knowing he wanted you to kiss back ... to have words of love whispered to you in Fergus's deep voice with its faint hint of a Scots burr retained through three generations of pioneer ancestors . . . Jeannie wrenched her mind back.

Stop thinking those thoughts, Jeannie my girl, they'll lead you nowhere except to making a fool of yourself some day. An imp at the back of her mind jeered at her. Imagine falling in love with Fergus MacGregor, who loves another man's wife. You despise him, do you hear? You despise him—

when you aren't loving him—despise him for falling in love with someone as unworthy as Cecily—yet you can't help loving him yourself!

She came back to find Elizabeth laughing. "Come back, Jeannie, from whatever regions you were wandering in. We've asked you something twice. I think the child must be in love, Fergus."

Jeannie's mouth twisted wryly in the darkness. "There are other things besides love to make one abstracted," she said lightly.

Fergus laughed lightly too. "Didn't you know, Elizabeth, Miss Fraser doesn't believe in love, only affection."

Jeannie sensed rather than saw that Elizabeth shot a quick look at her. Then she rallied to Jeannie's defence.

"How old are you, Jeannie? Twenty-one? Oh . . . twenty-two. Not a bad thing not to know too much about love at that age. So many know about love too soon, and aren't mature enough to recognize the right thing then, or to appreciate it. Or, being in too much of a hurry to experience life, they take the first man who offers in case they find love passes them by. Much wiser to wait for the real thing."

"I am rebuked," said Fergus.

To Jeannie's surprise, Neville was there.

"Oh, yes," said Fergus. "He is taking the singing part in this play. No one round here has a voice to compare with Neville's. He is a very fine baritone."

"Oh, so he's the hero. I thought he'd have made a fine villain. You know—fascinatingly wicked."

Fergus laughed. "As a matter of fact *I'm* the hero. The singing part is a secondary one. You'll be surprised to find me in the role of hero, won't you? But then you're the only one who knows how depraved I am."

Jeannie turned her back on him and went across to Neville. Perhaps it was best to save one's feelings by being with Fergus as little as possible and enjoying Neville's company—Neville, who might be a philanderer, but at least didn't pretend to be anything else.

Mrs. Oliver was there too and welcomed Jeannie warmly, though everyone seemed pleased and the producer told her she was a godsend. Jeannie decided to enjoy it all and to shut out of her mind the dread of meeting someone from Auckland.

She and Fergus had supper with Elizabeth, who was in sparkling mood. She showed Jeannie her new book just arrived that day.

"The next will be illustrated by you. I sent those samples of your work to England, as you know, and got an air-mail answer today."

She laughed and added, "I could add my own amen to what Mr. English said tonight. You *are* a godsend."

Fergus, narrowing his eyes against the smoke of his pipe, said, "Other folk think so too."

Elizabeth answered, "Yes, I daresay you've never had a worker like Jeannie living on the place before, have you?"

Jeannie cut in, her voice amused, "I don't know what he meant, Elizabeth, but I can assure you *he* doesn't regard me as a godsend."

"How right you are, Miss Fraser," drawled Fergus. He looked at Elizabeth. "I meant Mrs. Oliver's reaction to her coming here. She sees in our Jeannie an antidote. . . a most effective one . . . to all Neville's wild oats. Miss Fraser is just the type his type falls for. . . dewy, fresh, with an unswerving attitude towards right and wrong."

Elizabeth stared, as well she might. She had never heard that tone in Fergus's voice before. She glanced at Jeannie, whose cheeks were carnation pink and whose eyes were hurt.

Elizabeth said sharply, "If that's a joke, Fergus, it's in very poor taste."

Fergus's eyes glinted. Jeannie had an idea he valued Elizabeth Goldie's opinion more than anyone's. But he said, still with that mocking drawl, "How right you are. But then Jeannie will agree with you . . . she thinks I have shocking taste."

Across the supper-table drawn close to the fire Jeannie's eyes met his.

"Well," she said, as lightly as she could manage, "I did think so at our first meeting. Do you blame me?"

"No. It was a logical conclusion . . . logical to anyone whose ideas are so dogmatic . . . to whom black is black, and white is white, and there are no shades in between. Grey simply doesn't exist." He laughed. "Excuse us, Elizabeth, we just naturally spar."

Elizabeth said calmly, handing Jeannie more coffee, "Sparring doesn't worry me, Fergus, it's often a sign of healthy friendship or the rather



stimulating conflict between man and woman, but I didn't like to hear you sneering at Jeannie's untouched air or at her sense of right and wrong. There is too little of it in this world as it is."

Fergus's smiling eyes, unperturbed, met Elizabeth's. "I crave pardon. Elizabeth, you're still a firebrand." He turned to Jeannie. "I shan't be able to bully you when she's about. You have a champion."

It was cleverly done, putting it back on the level of banter.

Jeannie put her cup down. "A new experience for me to have a champion. I've always had to fight my own battles."

They took their leave soon after. Elizabeth came to the door with them, switched on the lantern over the front porch.

"Goodnight, Jeannie," she said with warmth. "Will you come over in the morning and sketch that urn of dahlias for me?" She turned to Fergus and her tone was two degrees less cordial. "Goodnight, Fergus."

"Oh, no, you don't, Elizabeth Goldie," he said. "It isn't time for frosts yet. If Jeannie is to be your protegee I must watch my step." His mouth twitched, he bent his head, kissed Elizabeth full on the mouth, said, "There! I've always wanted to kiss you." They heard Elizabeth laughing as they drove away.

When they stopped at the gate Jeannie put a hand on the car door. Fergus reached out a hand and drew hers back. "Don't go in for a moment. I owe you an apology too."

Jeannie stiffened. "Please don't bother, Mr. MacGregor. I realize you had to apologize to Elizabeth. You and she know a friendship it would be a pity to spoil, but—"

"But you mean there's no friendship between you and me?"

"Well... is there?"

He didn't answer that.

He added after a moment, "But just the same I do apologize. One should never sneer at intrinsic goodness."

Jeannie didn't know what to say. When Fergus spoke like that she knew it did all sorts of things to her. She stayed silent.

"Well... ?" he asked finally, laying a hand on both hers as they lay in her lap.

Jeannie wanted to turn her hands up and clasp his, so definitely masculine, so comfortingly warm. She wanted to say, "Oh, Fergus!" but she dared not.

So instead she said laughingly, "You make me sound a prig! Am I really like that?"

He said sombrely, "I don't know what you're like. There's an air of mystery about you in spite of. . . "He stopped.

Jeannie said, still on a light note, "In spite of my little plaster saint face, my unwritten forehead?" Her tone turned to anger, a primitive, satisfying anger that would not be denied. "Good heavens! What a combination! Mystery and innocence. Mr. MacGregor, I think you'd better stick to stone fruit. You seem to understand them better than you understand women. Goodnight."

She slammed the door. She slept better that night.

In all things pertaining to the stone and pip fruit Jeannie bowed to Fergus. It was the only way. But he could not persuade her to re-decorate the house beyond having the outside painted.

"No, Mr. MacGregor, I shall have what repairs are necessary attended to. I believe in that—otherwise a property deteriorates, but beyond what I'm able to do myself in the way of interior decoration, making new curtains, painting and papering the walls and so on, no."

"But why, in heaven's name? Aunt Jean only kept it this way because she was sentimental and old-fashioned, and these things were part of her life. When it came to building the manager's house she didn't stint anything. She put in every labour-saving device necessary for two men, in fact for a whole family, for she knew I might not always be here, and a married man might succeed me. She furnished it beautifully too, as you can see. So why not spread yourself? The estate can stand it."

He looked down into the hazel-green eyes. There was a shadow in them.

"Why look like that?"

"Like what?"

"Troubled, and a little wistful. As if you would like to transform the house but dare not. Hasn't Mr. Gillingham satisfied you fully as to your financial position? I notice you still live fairly frugally. No extravagances . . . though you stint the children for nothing."

Jeannie said, "Perhaps it's because we've been cheeseparing for so long that I find it hard to splash ... I think I shall have to make my own decisions about such things, Mr. MacGregor. I hardly feel it's necessary for me to define my reasons to you. The house is old-fashioned, I grant you, but so homely and comfortable and secure. That's all I ask at the moment."

She could not explain that she carried with her always a dread of Bertram finding out where they were, of getting his hands on her inheritance. Perhaps it was foolish, he might not stand a chance, but he was crafty where money was concerned. Jeannie did not want to spend recklessly ... The thought of that substantial, if not lavish, bank account was her greatest comfort and reassurance. It meant that if it came to a court case she would have money to fight back. It might even weight the scales in her favour if she could prove she was not a spendthrift and that it was well within her means to support the children till they could earn for themselves.

Fergus looked down on her impatiently. "There's something about you I can't understand, some reserve, some holding back."

Jeannie dropped her brown lashes. He was just a little too astute for comfort. When she looked up, her voice was cool.

"I don't particularly want your closer understanding, Mr. MacGregor. We're merely business associates." She put down her tea-towel, scooped the last of the dishes into the cupboard.

"There, I'm ready to come to the sheds now."

They walked out to the brick path by the drying-green. Fergus stopped, looked at her clothes-line, laughed. Jeannie gazed up at him in astonishment.

He answered her look, waving towards a lineful of diaphanous lingerie, be-frilled and be-laced.

"There's still some hope for you. Jeans and T-shirts by day, glamour by night. You certainly had a spending spree there, didn't you? Keeping to essentials only and cheeseparing economy doesn't apply when it comes to feminine friperies, I'm glad to see."

Jeannie went scarlet. "Why glad to see?"

"Because no one who goes in for negligees like this," he flicked a frilly hem as it billowed towards him, "can possibly be as utility-minded, as prim and proper as you seemed at first, Miss Fraser ... in fact even cold and hard."

Jeannie turned her face away. Cold and hard? ... Oh, not where you're concerned. Oh, Fergus, if you only knew!

She said, but there was a tremble in her voice, "It might not have occurred to you that to some people we show a side of our nature that's—that's—different from the side we show other people."

Fergus stood quite still. Jeannie was aware of his rigidity and wondered at it. She kept her eyes on the distant scene, the lovely hills, the cotton-wool cloud puffs in the serene sky, the rich golden yellows and russets of the autumn landscape. ...

"Then to whom do you show your warmer side, Jeannie?"

*Jeannie!* He'd only once before used her name, and that in jest to Elizabeth. It was bitter-sweet.

"That doesn't matter to you," she said, controlling the tremor this time. "Our relationship is purely one of business."

"Is it? Is it really? Has it never occurred to you that I feel a little responsible for you? I work for you, true. But I'm quite a few years older than you.. . how many, eight... ten? I'm thirty. And I've seen a bit more of the world than you have and—well, I was the one who introduced you to Neville Oliver."

Jeannie sighed. "We always seem to get back to Neville." She turned to face him, looked up at him frankly. "Mr. Macgregor—I'm afraid *I* don't understand *you* either. It doesn't add up."

"What doesn't?"

Jeanne said slowly, her eyes on his, "Neville is a lightweight—I understand that. But at least he doesn't..." She stopped. When she didn't answer he said, "I'll say it for you ... at least Neville doesn't dangle after married women! Wasn't that what you were going to say?" He had her wrist in an iron grip, his gaze smouldering and determined, holding hers, forcing her to admit it. He was white under his ruddy tan.

Jeannie, to her horror, felt her eyes suddenly fill with tears.

He noticed immediately, the anger giving place to wonder. "Jeannie, what's the matter? If you were going to say what I thought you were going to say, why cry about it?" His hand loosed its grip on her arm, slid down to her hand, his calloused one enfolding hers.

She looked down, the tears on her lashes. She put up her other hand, dashed the tears away impatiently as a child might.

" Just... just that we always seem to get back on to that subject and I—I —"

"You what, Jeannie?"

"I'd rather forget it. I wish it had never happened."

"Why do you wish that?"

Jeannie swallowed. She must be careful here. Let no hint of her real feelings escape her.

She said slowly, "Because apart from that ... and although we seem to strike sparks from each other so easily, I do appreciate the way you treat the children ... You're so patient with my stormy little sister. You're good for her. And like an elder brother to Peter, teaching him to drive, taking him for climbs, going off to the pictures together, all the things Peter has never had—with a man relative of his own. I wish that first meeting had never occurred. And, of course, your work is beyond criticism."

Fergus was holding himself very straight, his eyes expressionless. Jeannie hoped desperately she had put it well. Her hand stirred in his. She doubted if he knew he was holding it.

"Fergus, I hope I haven't sounded patronizing. I didn't mean to."

He smiled. How different that craggy face looked when he smiled.

"No, you didn't sound patronizing. You sounded..."

He didn't finish that. Afterwards Jeannie wished he had. He went on, "Then I take it we can go on from here on a better footing? But listen. I'm quite sincere about Neville. He is a man-of-the-world type and even if—from the circumstances of our first meeting—you feel this sounds odd from me, I would like to feel that—in a brotherly sort of way—I made you aware of the fact that you might be playing with fire."

It *was* entirely brotherly. Jeannie knew that, but it warmed the heart none the less.

She said, "Thank you, Fergus. But—to set your mind at rest—don't you think I'm quite capable of demanding from Neville a certain code? He has never once offended me in any way."

Fergus looked down on her. She was not very tall, and slightly built with it, but she did have a sturdy air about her, something that was wholly due to the spirit. And more than that ... a certain indefinable aura of virginity. It might seem a frail armour, yet even with men like Neville it was enough to keep them from overstepping any bounds.

"I can believe that, Jeannie. You're quite right. Perhaps it is a pity there aren't more like you ..." He hesitated, seemed about to say something else, then into the silence came the unmistakable sound of the gate clicking. They turned and Fergus released her hand. Elizabeth.

Fergus muttered something that sounded remarkably like "Damn the woman". But it couldn't have been. He liked Elizabeth too much. Or if he had said that it would only be because he had been caught holding her hand.

"Hallo." Elizabeth's voice was gay. "I'm coming to offer my help, but I have an ulterior motive. I knew Jeannie said you would be packing Goldmine Nectarines today. If I help you all morning may she come over this afternoon and do some sketching? I had some marvellous ideas last night. I worked till one this morning getting one roughed out, and I want some headings and tail-pieces for the chapters. The flowers I want her to do won't last long this weather. And that wind yesterday took toll of the whole garden. Would that be all right with your Big Chief, Jeannie?"

Fergus laughed. "Would it make much difference if it wasn't convenient? You'd get around Old Nick himself, Elizabeth. Yes. We're sending these up north by chartered plane anyway, along with some from Miner's Spur Orchards and Richardson's, so they'll have to be finished by lunch-time."

"Oh, really? Then we'd better get cracking. I hadn't realized it was so urgent. You and Jeannie looked as if you had all day."

Fergus said solemnly, "Oh, we were discussing some important business. No, no, you didn't interrupt, Elizabeth. We'd blethered long enough."

His eyes met Jeannie's and there was a smile at the back of them. It gave Jeannie a glow at her heart as if for once they shared comradeship. As they walked down to the sheds she told herself firmly she mustn't read too much

into the incident. It was purely a friendly gesture, bridging a gap. But the happiness stayed with her all day.

THE pace grew faster as the concert approached, though now work in the orchards and in the sheds was lessening.

Jeannie worked hard on her scenery and was present at most of the practices, coming to know the township folk and finding them friendly and appreciative. Fergus had been right about the earlier attitude.

One lass, Beverley Strange, said quite frankly, "We thought you were the standoffish kind. I'm afraid we misjudged you. You were only shy, I suppose."

Jeannie let it go at that. It was quite impossible in a small community to hold aloof. If, in a city, you wanted to stay out of public life it was much easier. And somehow, now that she and Fergus had come to a better understanding of each other, even though at times she knew a wild regret that he was in love with Owen Chalmers' wife, she had not so many fears. If it came to a court case over the guardianship now, Fergus might back her up and help her prove she was a fit and proper person to have charge of the children.

The night of the concert was clear and starry, a moon not quite full since it was a week to Easter, and there was a very real threat of frost in the air.

Neville not only had a singing part in the play but was also singing earlier. The hall was packed, car-loads had come from Ranfurly, Roxburgh, Naseby, Alexandra. Jeannie was wearing a frock she and Elizabeth had contrived between them.

"I'm all for effect for this concert," said Elizabeth. "I want you to look slightly arty, Jeannie, as befitting the stage designer." Fergus had laughed at them. "There is some material at Phillimore's, furnishing material really, but it would be just the thing. Great daubs of colour."

"Good heavens," said Fergus, "you'll make her look like an upholstered couch or one of those finger-paintings the kids do in the kindergarten. Why not let her wear that brown thing—all poppies, that's colourful enough."



Elizabeth turned a scornful look on him. "It's a sweet frock, but not out of the ordinary. Too formal. I want this draped, sort of casually loose in parts, like a Greek statue, but caught in with a wide belt."

"Sounds ghastly," said Fergus, "but I don't doubt you'll get your own way, Mrs. Bossy Goldie; thank heaven my part calls for a lounge suit all the way through, because if you took it into your head that the hero should appear in a string of beads and a shark's tooth necklace, I don't doubt you'd get your own way. Anyway fashion—in women's clothes—is beyond me!"

"Then seeing it's beyond you, my sweet, why not leave us to it? It may sound crazy, but Jeannie will really be something in it, I promise you."

Now Fergus was surveying the results of their labours as he called for them. Peter and Teresa were out in the car with Lachie, Jeannie wasn't quite ready.

She opened the kitchen door and came in. Fergus whistled.

She and Elizabeth had been into Dunedin in Elizabeth's car to have their hair styled. Usually Jeannie's hair, worn rather long, was a mass of golden-brown waves. Now it was swathed to one side at the back, pinned up with a bright green comb, swept back from her forehead and caught with an emerald clasp. The draping of the frock had been cleverly done. Its basic colour was the vivid green and about her neck was twisted a long rope of rough green beads that Elizabeth had produced.

Jeannie was laughing. "I don't even feel like me," she said.

"You don't look like you. You look Bohemian . . . knowledgeable . . . not in the least like a little plaster saint."

Their eyes locked. Jeannie suddenly found she was breathless. She turned away. "I've forgotten a handkerchief," she said untruthfully.

Since it was an informal concert, the performers sat in a part of the hall reserved for them while other items were on. Jeannie sat between Elizabeth and Fergus.

Neville had a voice that could have taken him on to any concert platform.

"We're lucky to have him really," said Fergus.

Neville began to sing:

"Where e'er you walk cool gales shall fan the glade,  
Trees, where you sit, shall crowd into a shade;  
Where e'er you tread the blushing flow'rs shall rise,  
And all things flourish where e'er you turn your eyes."

Jeannie told herself that it was nonsense that he seemed to be directing his song towards their group. That was artistry—to make listeners one and all believe that a singer sang for them alone.

Then his encore. She heard Fergus and Elizabeth draw in deep breaths as the accompanist played the first few bars. Before he began to sing Neville sought Jeannie's eyes in a direct look there was no mistaking; he smiled audaciously and began to sing:

"I dream of Jeannie with the light brown hair "

Jeannie felt the colour surge into her cheeks, sensed Fergus look sharply at her. At the close of the song there was again the interlocking of glances. One or two heads turned in her direction. Fergus stood up, said to Jeannie shortly, "Time we went backstage. You are coming, aren't you?"

She nodded, and followed him, glad to get away from the curious eyes, some indulgent, some disapproving. It was good to have something to do backstage.

The play, short though it was, was an unqualified success and merited great applause. Then suddenly it was all over. Mrs. Oliver had arranged an after-party at her place. Jeannie was rather sorry she had. She would so much rather have got away quietly and thought it all over.

Lachie, with his usual kindness, was going home with the children, someone giving them a lift, and was going to spend the night in the homestead, so Fergus and Jeannie could go on with the other players. Actually, Jeannie wished he had not offered, then the children would have afforded her an excuse to dodge the party.

All was bustle and excitement behind the scenes, talking over the faults and perfections of the performance, tidying up, sorting out costumes, removing grease-paint.

Neville touched Jeannie's arm. "I'm taking home a crowd first, Mr. English, his wife and daughter and one or two more. I'll come back for you."

Fergus's voice. "No need, Neville. She's coming with me."

Neville accepted that, cast a rueful, laughing glance at Jeannie.

Jeannie's head was aching by the time she and Fergus got into the car.

"I'd just as soon be going home," she said, admitting to the head.

"So would I," said Fergus, "and this party will go on for hours if I know Oliver's parties. They'll take a while to sort themselves out.. . Let's go up Piper's Hill in the car for a breath of air. No one will notice if we don't arrive for a while yet."

It was over the river and up a narrow one-way road. Not that they would meet any vehicles at this time of night. It was purely a scenic drive where folk with visitors drove up to the lookout point. In daytime it had a marvellous view right out over a winding stream that finally fed into the mighty Clutha.

Years ago there had been a homestead below with access to a road on the valley itself, and Jeannie had been told that in spring daffodils and irises followed the path of the stream for miles, planted long ago by a pioneer bride homesick for England.

But tonight it lay bathed in sable shadows, dark and mysterious with never a light showing. Above them the moon cast a silvery radiance, stars studded the black velvet of the skies. Faint clouds drifted across looking like flimsy stoles swathed about a sequin-dotted evening gown. Fergus put the car window down to let in the fresh, sweet night air.

Jeannie said, "Do you want to smoke, Fergus? Because it won't affect my head. I only needed quiet."

"No, I'll not smoke. There'll be plenty of fug later at Oliver's. How I hate after-parties. They pall on one. I detest the modern habit of prolonging everything."

They sat in silence, the first friendly silence they had ever shared, Jeannie thought. She was aware of a quiet happiness stealing over her.

Fergus said slowly, "What did you think of Neville's songs?"

"He has a very fine voice."

He sounded as if he were smiling. "I didn't ask what you thought of his singing. I asked what you thought of his songs."

Jeannie twisted round to look up at him. "Isn't that the one and the same thing?"

"No. I meant his choice of songs."

"Oh, that. It didn't mean a thing—never does with Neville. It's just the audacious gesture he delights in making."

"I'm not so sure it was just that tonight. I think for the first time in his life Neville is serious."

Jeannie shrugged. "It will just be till someone else who takes his fancy comes along."

"It was pretty heady stuff, though. Most girls would be delighted to be singled out like that."

Jeannie said reflectively, "It's odd ... I prefer speaking voices to singing voices. There is a certain timbre and warmth in speech that I don't find in singing. So I always prefer plays to opera. I hope it doesn't sound affected—as if I were striving to sound different."

"It doesn't. It sounds honest. After all, even people with no musical appreciation whatsoever rarely admit it."

Jeannie said simply, "I was far more entranced with that poem you repeated at the end. What a fitting climax. Whoever wrote that play certainly had a flash of real inspiration in using it. You looked much older in that scene, with the wings of white hair." She looked closer. "You haven't brushed it out yet." She lifted a hand to his temples, realized what she was doing, brought her hand back hastily and said quickly to cover up her instinctive movement, "Who did write that play?"

"Joy Ashford ... a New Zealand playwright. So you liked that bit?"

"Yes. How does it go . . . ?"

Fergus began:

"... So shall we live.

And though the first sweet sting of love be past,

The sweet that almost venom is; though youth

With tender and extravagant delight,

The first and secret kiss by twilight hedge,  
The insane farewell repeated o'er and o'er,  
Pass off; there shall succeed a faithful peace;  
Beautiful friendship tried by sun and wind,  
Durable from the daily dust of life.  
And though with sadder, still with kinder eyes,  
We shall behold all frailties, we shall haste  
To pardon, and with mellowing minds to bless."

The beautiful words fell into a pool of silence. Jeannie felt that the meaning of it all widened and widened like the rings of the pool. Then Fergus said, "It's *from Marpessa* by Stephen Phillips."

Jeannie said dreamily, "How perfect. Just what ideal marriage should mean, I suppose. It rounded things off beautifully in that play, didn't it? After all the frets and fevers of their youth. Beverley took the part of your wife very well."

Fergus was silent a moment, considering it. "I don't think you're quite right saying perfect, Jeannie. I don't think that all tender and extravagant delight should pass off with the years. Wouldn't the ideal marriage need something a little more than just beautiful friendship? Wouldn't it need something a little more vital? I feel that lovely though the poem is, it doesn't say quite enough."

It was Jeannie's turn to be silent, considering that.

"I think you're right," she said at last. "But those last lines are very wise. About looking on all frailties with kinder eyes . . ." Her voice trailed off as she realized they were back once more on to the old ground. To his love for Cecily, who was married to someone else! Dismay gripped her.

But his hand came to cover hers. "It's all right, Jeannie. I know that was unintentional this time." He smiled down on her. "In any case, I think you *do look* on that more kindly now, don't you?" She didn't answer. He tightened his grip. "Don't you, Jeannie?"

Her voice was only a thin thread of sound. "Yes, Fergus."

He was still smiling. He bent his head. She saw the corner of his nicely-cut mouth go up in the by now familiar whimsical fashion. "Don't worry, this

isn't a lesson in experience this time ..." His eyes danced. "It's for the best of all reasons ... wanting to."

His lips came down on hers, gently. Then suddenly they were not gentle at all, but demanding, possessive.

Jeannie became vividly aware of something . . . This might not mean as much to Fergus as to her . . . but that didn't matter somehow. Yet all her life long she would be glad of this particular moment. The moment when she knew the ecstasy the poets wrote of wasn't a figment of the imagination but a real, true world, and the ones who thought it didn't exist ... who thought that life was prosaic, that love, instant, irresistible, was something that existed only in the imagination of those who wrote about it and had no relation to reality—were the ones who put up with second-best in their living.

This was possession, something that took charge of your whole being; made you suddenly aware that this was the reason for living, that this was the secret of the urge of man and woman towards each other, something to be disciplined and controlled till the ultimate perfection of sharing each other could be consummated in marriage, yet even now, in its first blossoming, could make the brightest star seem to shine more brightly still. ..

She even understood about Fergus loving Cecily now. If he had found this magic in Cecily it might have been hard to resist...

That moment in the office might have been an unguarded one. He might have—since- regretted it. Might even have made up his mind there would be no more. Suddenly, gloriously, Jeannie knew that despite that one moment of weakness Fergus wasn't the man to take a wife away from her husband.

Perhaps to Fergus this kiss was no more than the enchantment of a moment, born of many things ... the stirred feelings that acting in a tender, passionate play would naturally bring; a setting like this .. . trees, moon, the nearness of a woman .. .

It certainly wouldn't mean as much to him as it had to Jeannie, but she would always treasure it. The kiss ended. Fergus left his arm about her, his other hand still on hers.

Jeannie stirred, looked up. Her voice was shaken. "We must go, Fergus. The party will have started."

Fergus sat up, pressed the self-starter the engine sprang to life. Jeannie's eyes swept the scene below and beyond in a sadness of farewell. The moment was ended. There would never be another quite like it. .. yet she had a feeling their relationship from now on would never be strictly business.

Just before they entered the drive of Mallow Glen where Neville and his mother lived, Jeannie said, "Fergus, would you mind pulling in under this street lamp? I think I'll have to do a few. . . er . . .running repairs."

He laughed. "I get it. Lipstick smudged, eh? Well, it might be."

While she was busy he said, "You've not had much fun since coming here, have you? Daresay you miss the city lights a bit. Let's go over to Pakiwaitara House tomorrow night. Dine and dance."

Jeannie's heart was singing.

They drove on, came up to the terrace where lights from the windows streamed out.

"We can just go in through those french windows," said Fergus. "No need to be formal."

A strange pang tore through Jeannie. She was constantly forgetting Cecily's relationship to Neville. She wondered if Mrs. Oliver knew that Cecily and Fergus . . . Jeannie shut her mind to that. If ever she was to know full peace of mind she must forget all that, especially now that Fergus seemed to be. ..well., .recovering from that affair. They came into the room unnoticed in the crush.

Everyone was talking at once, drinking, nibbling savouries.

"Better have a word with Mrs. Oliver," said Fergus in Jeannie's ear. "She'll never know we've not been here all the time, but it's best to greet her." They made their way through, stopping now and then for Fergus to receive congratulations on his part, Jeannie on the scenery.

Neville and Mrs. Oliver were up against the bar, talking to Mr. and Mrs. English. There was somebody else there, tall, with strikingly blonde hair, who had her back to them.

She turned round as Neville said, "Oh, there you are, Fergus, I was looking all over for you and Jeannie. Where the deuce have you been?"

Fergus grinned. "Hasn't a moon ever delayed *you*, Neville?" he said deliberately. Then his gaze shifted to the woman beside Neville.

It was at that moment too that Jeannie recognized her.

Cecily Chalmers!

Jeannie felt as if the world swung about her for a moment, as if the glittering chandelier overhead dipped and swung. She had an arm through Fergus's arm. She tightened it for a moment, then, recovering herself, slipped it out and stood there.

Fergus's greeting sounded easy. "Oh, hullo, Cecily. Why weren't you at the concert? Or isn't a small-town concert precisely in your line?"

Cecily said, "It wasn't precisely in your line—once. But as a matter of fact I arrived unheralded and unsung with everyone out and only Clemmie to tell me there was a party in the offing. I came off the late plane."

"She taxied all the way from Taieri," said Neville. "Isn't my little sister an extravagant piece!" It was at that moment that Cecily recognized Jeannie.

No one would have guessed from Jeannie's unwavering gaze that she was feeling sick in the pit of her stomach. Cecily's glance was much more unguarded. It took in all sorts of things . . . among them that this was the girl who had delayed Fergus. A moon, he had said. That meant only one lung.

Neville, all unknowing, said, "And this is Miss Fraser, who—"

Cecily stopped him. "Who was once my husband's typist." She said to Jeannie in a clear, high voice, "So this was where you came. My husband told me you had disappeared."

As a remark this was sufficiently arresting for all eyes in the group to rivet immediately on Jeannie. Mr. and Mrs. English, after a staring moment, moved away, picked up their glasses, melted into the crowd.

Fergus said, "*Disappeared!* What do you mean, Cecily?"

She shrugged. "Just that. I missed her from the office—asked my husband. He said nothing more than that. A nine days' wonder among the staff, I suppose. But why come here, Miss Fraser?"

Neville answered for her. "Mrs. Kelvington left her Strathlachan."

Cecily drew in her breath. So the girl was more than a two-a-penny typist now! She looked directly at Fergus.

"Then . . . ?"



Fergus said quietly, "Then that makes Jeannie my employer. Yes. My very charming employer."

Jeannie stood there feeling defenceless, though she had a faint gratitude towards Fergus for his last sentence. She didn't know how far Cecily's voice has carried. People would wonder why she had not told her employer, her friends, why she was leaving Auckland. Why she had disappeared.

Cecily's voice was sharp. "Oh, I see, and part of your duties is to act as her escort."

Fergus's voice was light. "The age of chivalry is not yet dead. Shall we say, rather, that it's my privilege."

There was a flash in Cecily's yellowish eyes. Neville saved the situation. "Actually there has been a switch-over of roles, owing to my being immersed in my duties as host. . . *I* am officially Jeannie's escort. .. Fergus, of course, was charmed to act as my stand-in. Jeannie, what will you drink?"

Jeannie managed a smile. "Fruit punch, thank you."

Neville said, "Then that's two of you." She was surprised to see him bring back fruit punch for Fergus too.

Fergus said levelly, "You're looking very well, Cecily. Tell me, how is Owen?"

There was the suggestion of a shrug. "Still in hospital. Still being kept perfectly quiet. And the doctor says months of rest when he comes out. Exciting, isn't it?"

Jeannie's hand tightened round her glass. She strained to hear Fergus's answer against the rising chatter.

Fergus said, "But very necessary, I imagine, if he's to make a complete recovery."

Jeannie saw his eyes, fraught with some meaning she could not fathom, but which seemed to hold a hint of warning, meet Cecily's.

"Of course," Cecily's voice was as smooth as cream, "but I needed a break before he comes home. I'll have a nurse for him, of course. In fact two, probably."

Neville's hand was under Jeannie's elbow. He guided her through the crowd to a window recess. "I had no idea that you knew Cecily—that you had worked for her husband. Why didn't you tell me?"

Jeannie gazed at him almost unseeingly. "I didn't know for some time that your sister and my former boss's wife were one and the same person."

"Well, why didn't you mention it when you did, my sweet?"

"I—I don't know," said Jeannie unsteadily, putting a hand to her head. "Neville . . . I'm sorry, but I'll have to go home. I've got a terrific head. That was why we didn't come on here right away. I tried for a bit of fresh air. Where is your telephone? I'll get a taxi and go home."

"I'll take you," said Neville, steering her towards the french windows.

Jeannie protested, "No, I mustn't take you away. Let me get a taxi, Neville. Or perhaps Fergus would take me. You're host."

They swung round. Fergus passed them, Cecily in his arms, dancing.

Neville said, "I don't think Fergus will get away from my darling little sister too easily. Besides, he's had a fair innings tonight and I'll not be missed in a crowd like this. Or they'll think I'm sitting out with my Jeannie with the light brown hair. Come on, darling."

It was a way of escape, and what did it matter who took her? He left the window down and the cool air fanned her hot cheeks and played havoc with the carefully arranged tresses. She pulled out the comb and let them tumble down.

They wound up the hill, stopped at the gate to the homestead. Neville saw her to the door, looked down on her with a hint of compassion.

He said, flicking her cheek, "Don't let my sister upset you, my sweet." He flicked her cheek. "She's a dog in the manger where Fergus is concerned. Why has she got it in for you? Was she jealous of you and Owen?"

"Me and Owen?" Jeannie was too surprised to be grammatical. "Why, Mr. Chalmers was my employer, and years and years older than I."

Neville gave a wry smile. "That wouldn't mean a thing to Cecily. After all, she's only a year or two older than you, and she chose to be an old man's darling. And it seems you did cut and run. I thought that might have been the reason. A little Puritan like you—if she fancied her employer—might easily decide that flight was the noble thing to do."

Jeannie said, "It was nothing like that, Neville. Please put it out of your mind. It was purely personal, nothing to do with business affairs at all. I don't want to discuss it."

Neville wasn't in the least offended. He pinched her chin.

"It's been quite a night, hasn't it? I meant it to go so differently. It was to end up with a proposal." He laughed. "But it can wait. After all, one only proposes once in a lifetime. At least I hope so. Think it over, won't you, my pet?"

Jeannie burst out laughing. "Oh, Neville, Neville. Can't you imagine Mrs. Chalmers' face if you told her we were about to become sisters-in-law?"

Neville said calmly, "That's better. I thought you were going to go to bed to weep. You had the look of it."

"What risks you take, idiot, proposing to girls simply to cheer them up. What if I had taken you seriously?"

"Then I should have taken you to Dunedin tomorrow to choose a ring."

She shook her head at him. "You *are* an idiot, Neville, but a nice idiot. Goodnight."

He stepped forward, seized her, bent his head.

Jeannie turned her face away so that his kiss landed on her cheek. He held her, his fingers trying to force her face round. She was bent back, her hair falling back over her shoulders, the very silhouette of a quite passionate embrace.

At that moment a car, coming up the drive, swept round a bend and illuminated them brightly. It seemed to check for a moment, then swept on, going into the manager's garage. Fergus.

Jeannie was aghast. She pulled herself free, heard Fergus's doors slam. She went straight into the house, locked the door.

The headache was certainly persistent. She wasn't sure if she mightn't be quite ill. Jeannie could not sleep despite taking aspirin and making herself a hot drink in the wee sma's. Her thoughts did nothing to induce slumber. Cecily was going to be a force to be reckoned with. There was no doubt that she would tolerate no interference where she and Fergus were concerned.

That had its funny side. She and Fergus had started off as enemies, but lately, especially last night, on Piper's Hill, there had been a drawing together. Jeannie was aware now that you didn't fall in love with a man because of his virtues . . . there had to be something else underlying it.

Fergus was so kindred in all else. She hated the thought that he had made love to another man's wife, but to love was to forgive, to try to understand.

How she wished Cecily had not come at just this moment. However, if Fergus was genuinely attracted to her, Jeannie, the old pull to Cecily might not be as strong. He had appeared to champion her when he had said, "My very charming employer." It could be he was trying to break with Cecily. That might mean he was simply using Jeannie, but that didn't matter. She didn't care. She would help him all she could. For his own sake, and . . . perhaps a little for her own.

She turned over, felt again the old ache in her side. It had been rather persistent lately. She thought she might have overdone things in the house, stripping off old wallpaper, reaching up with new. She must have pulled a muscle there and wasn't resting enough to get it entirely better. But there was so much to do and she loved doing it . . . the house, the garden, the shed work that brought her into daily contact with the man she loved . . .

Perhaps she ought to have a day or two in bed. It might be 'flu coming on. There had been a lot of stomach 'flu about and she definitely felt queasy. But perhaps a good night's sleep would do her good.

Jeannie turned again, fell asleep at last, the physical comfort of the hot water bottle making her feel that after all she might be worrying about nothing. Cecily wouldn't know she had disappeared because of her stepfather. Being Cecily she would think there was a man in it. It wasn't likely she would ever run up against any of Bertram's neighbours, and he had a few friends, and as far as Fergus was concerned he had been rather . . . sweet. . . tonight.

Remembrance swept over Jeannie as she drifted deeper into sleep, warm and glowing . . . Fergus's arm around her, his hand enclosing hers ... Fergus saying of their kiss, "This is for the best of all reasons— wanting to." Fergus's voice moved her more than any other ever had.

She tried to stay awake to imagine Fergus's voice in love-making, found her pulses racing as they had last night on the hill above the valley, Fergus saying, "Wouldn't the ideal marriage need something a little more than just beautiful friendship?" Perhaps the affair with Cecily had been nothing more than a passing incident. Maybe Fergus desired nothing more than to forget it.

It might even be that she, Jeannie, had something to do with that wanting to forget . . . Jeannie fell over the edge of sleep into complete oblivion.

She and Fergus met in one of the orchards next morning. Jeannie knew a mixture of feelings. . . joy, sheer joy at seeing him with the late autumn sunshine glinting on his hair, watching his muscles ripple under the bronzed skin above the rolled-up blue shirt sleeves, and a vague, uneasy sense of guilt that had to do with what his car lights might have revealed to him last night.

The second sensation came uppermost as Fergus said, "You told me once that you'd not had much chance of getting out and about in Auckland because of your stepfather, but did no one ever tell you it simply isn't done to go to a function with one man and come home with another, leaving him no message?"

The bright colour ran up into Jeannie's cheeks. "But, Fergus, I did leave a message. I asked Neville to get someone to tell you I'd gone. I—I—you see I looked across the room and you were dancing with Mrs. Chalmers, and she—she would scarcely have relished an interruption, would she? And my head was so bad I was feeling bilious."

The greenish eyes looked up directly at him with such appeal that involuntarily Fergus looked softened. "N-no, I suppose not." Then his eyes hardened again. "But if your head was so bad that you couldn't wait till I finished that dance why didn't you go straight to bed? I hardly thought that a prolonged moonlight dalliance was the cure!"

Jeannie caught her breath. Then she looked up at him with a candour that would have disarmed an even angrier man.

"Fergus, that means you saw Neville kiss me. And you're making me feel guilty. Would you believe me when I say I didn't invite that kiss? That it—it took me by surprise. That I was trying to get away."

He stared. His eyes searched hers. Then, unwillingly, he smiled "All right, Jeannie, I'll accept that." He shook his head at her. "You're a dangerous woman."

It was Jeannie's turn to stare. "Me? Dangerous?"

He nodded. "You make me believe in ... people again."

Jeannie knew he had been going to say not people but women. And she was glad.

He said, "All right, but don't let it happen again."

Again a thrill of pure delight ran through Jeannie.

"I'll give you another chance to behave yourself, Miss Fraser. You're coming with me tonight to Pakiwaitara House . . . and coming home with me too, no matter who we meet up with. Understand?"

She nodded happily. The misunderstanding was cleared away. The future still held the dread of discovery, but if she and Fergus drew together perhaps somewhere there was a happy ending to that too.

The pain bothered her a little during the day but passed off altogether towards evening.

Neville rang when she was almost ready. His voice, cool, laughing, audacious, came along the wires to her.

"Just rang to ask you if you'd thought it over, Jeannie darling."

Neville had been so far from her thoughts all day she was at a loss to know what he meant. She found it hard to cover up her confusion.

Neville showed chagrin, but in true fashion bridged it with a rueful, "That's enough to give a man an inferiority complex. He offers his heart and his hand to a girl one night and she's completely forgotten it the next night. My life is blighted."

Jeannie laughed. "Neville, you're quite, quite mad."

"Well, may I come to see you tonight? After the kids are in bed?"

"I'm sorry. Some other night, perhaps. Fergus is taking me to Pakiwaitara tonight. What did you say? Oh, Neville ... you aren't supposed to use language like that over the phone."

He then said quickly, "How about if we make up a party and join you? Perhaps Beverley and Enid and ..."

"No," said Jeannie firmly. "And, Neville, I hear Fergus's car. Goodbye."

THE evening at the Accommodation House began well. It wasn't too crowded, the meal was excellent, the music good, and Jeannie enjoyed dancing with Fergus. They were almost, but not quite, back to their terms of the night before. It was hard, perhaps, to completely recapture the magic of Piper's Hill. Fergus's mouth had a faintly guarded look.

He'd said, or inferred, that he didn't altogether trust women. And Jeannie was willing to admit it must have looked bad to him as he swept up the hill to see her outlined against the darkness in Neville's arms. However, her candour had evidently been disarming, and her explanation had apparently satisfied him. Jeannie wished she could be confident it had completely convinced him.

But she was enjoying tonight. There had been no move from Cecily today. Perhaps there wouldn't be. Jeannie gave herself over to the spirit of the evening. It only lasted till the doors swung open and in came a party. Three men, three women, among them Cecily and Neville.

Jeannie heard Fergus draw in his breath. It wasn't long before the group spied the two of them, came to their alcove, took possession of it. Cecily certainly had no compunction about breaking in on a twosome. What she wanted to do, she did. What she wanted to have, she took.

Fergus was not exactly effusive. Realizing this made Jeannie's spirits soar. Perhaps for him the old attraction was dead. Did she dare to hope it was because—

Neville broke in on her thoughts. "Didn't take long to make it, did I? Had that party all jacked up within twenty minutes of speaking to you."

Jeannie hardly knew how she answered him. Fergus would think ... he did!

They were dancing together again. He said, "If you had wanted a crowd you could have said, Jeannie."

She bit her lip. "Fergus, I didn't mean- it was none of my—"

"Oh, let it go," he said savagely. "Don't wear yourself out thinking up excuses. Let's just dance."

Mechanically Jeannie joined in, but her head began to ache furiously and the by now familiar pain in her side returned to nag her. The party were noisy, not particularly well-behaved, and they were drinking too much. Especially Cecily.

She raised her eyebrows at the sight of Fergus's glass.

"Fergus darling, not still on the water-wagon?"

He grinned, impervious apparently to the maliciously amused tone.

"Not water. Lime and soda. No hangover with this ... or other consequences."

Jeannie looked at them both sharply. There had been something in his light words that gave them a sting.

Cecily laughed, the amber eyes sparkling. She raised her glass.

"To your well-kept resolution. What strength of will. You strong, silent men certainly make things hard for yourselves."

"Better perhaps than making it hard for ... other people."

There was a flicker of something in her eyes that was not amusement. It could have been anger ... or it could have been uneasiness, even fear.

Five minutes later Jeannie, dancing with one of the other men, came near Neville dancing with his sister.

She heard Neville say, "Lay off Fergus, will you, Cecily! The poor bloke paid for what he did to you. Some day he'll—"

She lost the rest as the couples swung away from each other. For what Fergus had done to Cecily. Not what Cecily had done to Fergus.

The rest of the evening was a nightmare to Jeannie. Cecily grew more daring, her voice rose. She was determined to appropriate Fergus.

Finally she said to him. "Fergus, you can take me home . . . it's not at all exciting to go home with one's brother. I couldn't stand it. A tame ending to a night like this. Neville will take Jeannie ... he'll love it, and I dare swear she will too."

Jeannie wondered how Fergus would get out of it... or if he would try.

His voice was blunt. "No, thanks, Cecily. You've had far too much to drink. I wouldn't risk my neck with you."



Jeannie saw the glitter in Cecily's eyes and held her breath. She saw Cecily subdue her anger, batten it down.

"Oh, I know I've had too much, pet. You can drive."

Fergus said more bluntly still, "Drunken passengers can be a menace too . . . *didn't you know, Cecily?*"

Jeannie wondered if she was imagining he had emphasized that. His words seemed to hang on the air. Cecily's face turned white, the rouge on her cheekbones standing out and making her pallor look ghastly.

Neville said hastily, "Don't be silly, Sis. Pack it up. You're coming home with me, and the sooner the better."

Fergus didn't look in the least put out, or sorry. He said briefly to Jeannie, picking up her wrap from the back of the chair, "Let's get cracking." She took it from him without a word, echoed faintly his unembarrassed goodnight to them all and went with him, out into the silence of the starlit hills.

They did not speak till Fergus drew to a standstill at the house.

Then he said, "Oh, well, that's that," went around, opened the door, helped her out, opened the back door, switched on the scullery light, said "Goodnight," and was gone.

Jeannie leaned against the door, drew a shuddering breath, let it go.

Fergus had been furious from the time Neville's party had walked in. He'd thought Neville and she had arranged it. How much use would it be to attempt more explanations? And what a pity the issue should be so confused just now when it looked as if Fergus was having no more dealings with Cecily. Or was it just frustrated longing that made him speak like that to her? Jeannie didn't know . . . besides, the pain in her head was worse and her side was an aching torment. She would go down to the doctor's tomorrow afternoon and ask him if it really was a pulled muscle. That hot water bottle had eased it last night. She rubbed some embrocation on, took some tablets, and ex-haustedly fell asleep. But even in her dreams apprehension pursued her. Cecily would not take this lying down.

When she awoke the headache was still there, the pain and the apprehension. It was justified, for no sooner had she got breakfast for all of

them, the children away to school and Uncle Lachie to the sheds, than the phone rang.

Cecily. Cecily who came to the point immediately.

"I want to see you, Miss Fraser. I want to see you right away. But I don't want to come up to Strathlachan and I don't want you to come here. My business with you is confidential."

Jeannie moistened her lips, said quietly, "I fail to see that we have anything to discuss. How can we? Things are very different now. I'm not your husband's typist now. I would prefer to have nothing to do with you. I have my own life to live."

"Exactly . . . and I want to make quite sure it doesn't interfere with mine. I'll drive down to where that cart-track goes up Sunset Gully at the back of your property. I'll meet you there in exactly ten minutes. We can sit in the car and talk. No, I won't take no for an answer. I must see you. You'll be very well advised to come."

Jeannie said with stiff lips, "Very well."

She looked down at herself. She was wearing a lemon overall with white collars and cuffs. She thought she would go like that. No doubt Cecily would be dressed to death, she always was. Perhaps her own best line was simplicity. It would make her look less like a threat to Cecily's love-life.

She wished this feeling of nausea would lift. It must be too many late nights. After all, she had hardly been ill in her life. Even when she had been overworked, keeping house and holding down an exacting job she had been very fit.

Jeannie took some baking-soda in milk and went out of the house into a glorious autumn day in Central Otago that she didn't even notice.. ..

She was glad her way led her in the opposite direction from the sheds. She wanted no meeting with Fergus to undermine her firm grip of her feelings. She must not show fear in front of Cecily Chalmers.

Jeannie came down the hillside, picking her way carefully to where the big black car waited. The hill-face was stony and she found she had to put her feet down carefully. That sore muscle was very tender and a careless step jarred it.

Cecily was in turquoise tweeds, had shadows under her eyes that owed nothing to make-up, and looked like something out of *Vogue*. She wasted no time, did no leading up, had no hint of apology in her tone.

"It's about Fergus. You're playing up to him. It's no use. Fergus is mine, he always has been."

Jeannie clenched her hands together in her lemon linen lap.

"I'm sorry if I seem dim, Mrs. Chalmers, but why didn't you marry him, and not Mr. Chalmers?"

"There were reasons. Not everybody marries the man they were meant to. Things went against us. But they won't always."

Jeannie said, "I can imagine the reasons— all with the dollar sign on them. And in case, it's not me you should be talking to but Fergus himself. Even in these days it's usually the man who makes the running."

She saw colour, bright and betraying, run up into Cecily's cheeks under the surface pink, saw the elegantly manicured nails curl into the palms of her hands. And Jeannie knew a primitive satisfaction she had never thought to feel.

Cecily released a tightly-held breath. "That," she said, "is impertinence."

"And what do you think this is? My affairs are my own. What I choose to do has nothing whatever to do with you, Mrs. Chalmers."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that. I could make your affairs my business."

Jeannie said in a carefully surprised tone, "You amaze me. My relations with Mr. Chalmers were purely office ones. Had I stayed you might have made things unpleasant for me. You threatened as much that day in the office when you and Fergus— Anyway, now I'm the owner of Strathlachan and Fergus is my manager, and I have an idea he's working out his own salvation. And I have a feeling that however much he may have been influenced by you in the past, his future plans don't include you."

There was a moment of blinding rage between them, culminating in a stinging slap on Jeannie's mouth.

Jeannie hardly heard what else Cecily said. Cecily was beside herself with anger. Above the pain of the blow Jeannie was conscious of a singing triumph within her. Because she was suddenly aware *that she believed what she had just said*. She believed Fergus *had* got Cecily out of his system.

She said, with infuriating gentleness, "Those sort of tactics wouldn't appeal to Fergus. You haven't much veneer, have you? And beneath it are the manners of a fishwife. I suppose Fergus has realized you're . . . rather shoddy."

But now Cecily had control of herself again. "There's more to you than I thought," she said surprisingly. "But you haven't a hope against me. There's something fishy behind this disappearance of yours. If you were left Strathlachan why did you choose to disappear? Why the dramatics? You so patently hero-worshipped my husband I could imagine you rushing to him all dewy-eyed and sparkling to tell him you'd had a property left you. And Owen, who is ridiculously sentimental, would have told me of your good fortune, and the firm would have given you a farewell afternoon tea, and presented you with a travelling rug or something equally fabulous, and there would have been a brief announcement in the papers about you leaving. As it is," her eyes narrowed, "you skipped out like a thief in the night. Why? I mean to know."

Jeannie felt a wave of nausea come over her, but whether it was to do with her physical sickness of last night or the threat, plus distaste for the whole scene, she did not know.

She said sturdily, when the wave of sickness passed, "Mrs. Chalmers, my reasons were strictly personal and nothing to do with you. I'm going to end this undignified conversation."

Cecily's long nails dug into her arm. "No, you're not. There's something behind it all. What is it? Or was it?" Her eyes suddenly narrowed. "I said hero-worship for Owen ... could it have been something more?"

She was disconcerted when Jeannie laughed. "Hardly ... *I'm* looking for love when I marry, not security. Mr. Chalmers is older than my own father would have been."

"I suppose you think that's funny. I'll remember that, you little ..."

Jeannie seemed still mistress of the situation. "Mrs. Chalmers, age wouldn't matter to me either had I loved anyone his age. It doesn't, you see. I don't suppose you have read any of Winifred Fortescue's books . . . now there was a marriage with a great disparity of ages, and an ideal one. But I'm afraid your marriage doesn't come in that category. So I said it to wound you.

You've taken the gloves off with a vengeance, and though I'm told I look like a plaster saint, I'm not by any means. If I'm attacked, I fight back. I've had great experience in fighting back." Jeannie's eyes were blazing.

Cecily stared. Her ideas about a milk-and-water maiden were rapidly undergoing reconstruction. A look of cunning came into her eyes.

"Well, perhaps it wasn't Owen, but I daresay it was some other man. Something you're ashamed of, something underhand. People don't disappear without good reason. When I get back to Auckland I shall put a private detective on to discover why you left so furtively." There was a cruel gleam in the yellow eyes as they rested on Jeannie's face. "But of course, whether or not I use my knowledge depends on you. I'm staying for a week or two and I want the monopoly of Fergus's company. If I don't get it... look out. And if you dare breathe one word of our meeting to him I'll use everything I can to discredit you in his eyes."

Jeannie opened the door. She would like to have said more, but her head was spinning. She was going to be sick.

She said, her head high, "Mrs. Chalmers, once before you threatened me—it was with dismissal then. Now nothing you can do can hurt me. But I say now as I said then, I despise people who allow themselves to be blackmailed."

Jeannie went across to the gate that led into the hill paddock, began to climb the hill, praying that Cecily would start the car and drive on before she had the added humiliation of being sick in front of her.

Cecily reversed rapidly, slid out of the cart-track, and was gone. Jeannie retired hastily behind a rock, then, after a brief rest, continued back to the house. She had a drink of soda water, thankful Pete had bought a make-it-yourself syphon only the week before, and lay down on top of her bed.

Her legs were trembling and despite her brave words fear was beginning to set in. Not for herself—she could not be forced to return to Bertram's household but for Peter and Teresa. Cecily had no scruples. Only beauty. She would stop at nothing.

Jeannie could quite imagine her conspiring with Mr. Skimmington to do her harm. At the thought of Peter and Teresa under Bertram's domination

again, Jeannie's hands grew icy-cold, her temples fiery hot. She pressed her palms against her eyes, holding in the tears that would have spelt relief.

The phone rang. It was a telegram concerning a shipment of fruit by chartered plane for Auckland. "We couldn't raise anyone at MacGregor's," the girl's voice said.

"I'll see it's given to Mr. MacGregor right away," Jeannie promised. "He may have forgotten to switch on the extension at the sheds."

She carefully made up, wanting no signs of distress to occasion comment from Fergus before she had thought out what she must do. Had there been just herself to consider she might have told him all, for she was sure enough of his innate kindness, but there were the children. Dare she take up Cecily's challenge? And in any case, kindness apart, weren't men known to have an unyielding regard for the letter of the law?

If she and Fergus had been engaged, it might have been different, but their relationship had only just developed from enmity and distrust to a hint of better understanding. She mustn't read too much into one kiss, a few moments of kinship and understanding. It would be embarrassing. Men didn't like to define their feelings too soon; if she did tell Fergus now, ask him to champion her, she might become an embarrassment to him. A situation like this might be the frost needed to wither and blacken this delicate bloom that was unfolding.

Jeannie gave a wry smile at her own fancy... That was what being an orchardist did to you. You saw everything in terms of blossom, blight, frost and fruit. In any case, their moment of magic on Piper's Hill had been too quickly overlaid by fresh doubt and suspicion. Fergus now thought she had asked Neville to come to Pakiwaitara House.

She saw Fergus coming down the hill from one of the orchards as she reached the shed. She thought he still looked angry, but that was probably sheer nervousness on her part. He walked into the shed with her.

Jeannie said, "This telegram just came through. About the stuff for the chartered plane." She laid the note on the bench, turned to go.

Fergus read it. "Just a moment. I'll ring about this, but I want to see you."

He got through to Roxburgh quickly, put the receiver back on its cradle.

He turned to face her and Jeannie's heart sank at the look on his face.

"You think I'm easily gulled, don't you, Jeannie?"

She swallowed. "What do you mean?"

"What do I mean . . . ? Oh, don't play the innocent. You've got the look of it, but it doesn't fit your true character. You must have laughed at the easy way I accepted your explanation yesterday. A kiss forced on you against your will. It sounded so feasible. I was quite ready to accept that because for one thing, I did that to you once myself, and for another I've been in circumstances myself where things looked black. But last night . . . Neville arriving with that party, arranged by you . . . what was it? Some obscure desire to score off Cecily . . . your former boss's wife? One you didn't like?" He laughed, an unpleasant laugh. "So I can discount the explanation about that kiss too."

Jeannie felt her temper rise. She dared not begin to explain. For one thing he was too furious to be ready to believe her. For another she mustn't give anything away. For the children's sakes she must keep quiet.

So she lifted her head, said lightly, infuriatingly, "What a to-do about nothing. What's one kiss?"

Fergus was oddly white under his tan. "What's one kiss? You mean one kiss among many? I thought—more fool I—that there was one kiss that might not have come under that category. I thought I'd lost faith in women. It's safer to mistrust them. Then you come along. I began to believe again. To believe in you . . . but oh, what's the use!"

"This morning you try to excuse your conduct on the 'What's in a kiss' line." He uttered a sound that was pure scorn. "But you didn't know that this morning, from new Owl's Roost, where I was seeing to the last of the Golden Queens, I saw you getting into Neville's car. You had quite a little interlude there, didn't you, Jeannie Fraser? Not a one-kiss session, that. One kiss doesn't leave a mark like *that*... Then you got out and went behind the rocks to wave goodbye to him. Just imagine . . . you once despised Cecily. Yet you're Judy O'Grady to Cecily's Colonel's Lady. . . sisters under the skin. Wanting more than one string to your bow. And very much Fay Leslie's daughter to boot."

His words ought to have fallen like a whiplash on Jeannie's spirit, but at the moment she was too taken up with physical things ... she was going to be

sick, very sick! Right in the middle of one of life's most dramatic moments! Jeannie turned and fled. It would be humiliation indeed if a bout of biliousness overtook her here. She just made it. She got around the corner of the shed.

It was a prolonged bout. Halfway through it she became aware that someone was supporting her. It could only be Fergus. She tried to thrust him away. Then a handkerchief was thrust into her hand.

And Fergus's voice saying, "Take it easy, Jeannie. You'll feel better soon." Even in the midst of her humiliation the imp at the back of her mind jeered at the sudden kindliness in his tones. What a contrast from the way he had spoken a few seconds before.

A spasm over, Jeannie mopped up, turned around. "Would you mind going away, Fergus? At moments like these one likes to be alone."

He gave an exasperated sigh. "Don't be ridiculous." She felt his eyes were raking her.

"Jeannie! I believe you're really ill! I thought at first that it was just that I'd upset you ... an attack of stomach nerves ..."

She shook her head. The situation was beyond her now. You couldn't maintain dignity and offence when you felt like this . . . The world of trees and sunshine and hillside was spinning round and round, her voice seemed to come from far away.

"No. It wasn't the quarrel. I've—I've been feeling queer for a day or two. I wanted to get the concert over before I gave in to it. Just tummy 'flu, I think. It's going round. Oh-h-h-h!"

She put her hand to her side. Fergus said quickly, "How long have you had a pain there?"

"Oh, fairly often... just a pulled muscle, I think, doing the papering, but this last day or two . . . oh-h-h-h—"

She felt her knees sag, felt Fergus's arm go round her, his voice: "Steady now, Jeannie. I want to get you up to the house. Don't go out on me, will you?"

She pulled herself together. "No, I'll try not to. Fergus, I think it must be appendicitis."



"I'm damned sure it is," he said, and bending down, picked her up. She was light, too light, he thought.

He took her into the homestead, laid her on her bed, picked up a rug, covered her with it.

Jeannie said faintly, "I put a hotty to it last night. Wrong thing to do, wasn't it, if it is my appendix?"

"Very wrong. I'll try to catch the doctor before he goes on his rounds. And I'll get Elizabeth. Just lie still."

Elizabeth and the doctor made a dead heat of it. The doctor wasted no time. Elizabeth helped him. The doctor went straight out to Fergus.

"Yes. Appendicitis. We'll be lucky if we beat it to bursting. We'll have to get a mercy plane up here at once. Dunedin hospital can have an ambulance waiting at Taieri."

Fergus said, "There's a chartered plane due to go soon with fruit freight. Any good?"

"Splendid. Ring them, will you? We'll take her to the airstrip in the estate car. Lay her along the seat."

Elizabeth packed Jeannie's things with an economy of fuss and time.

When they told her Jeannie said, "Peter and Teresa . . . what—?"

Elizabeth cut in, "They'll stay with me at Lavender Hill till you're well again."

Jeannie looked satisfied. Fergus and the doctor came in to carry her out. There was no time wasted. In an incredibly short space of time they were airborne. The doctor had given Jeannie an injection to soothe her, but it didn't put her off to sleep right away. She was exercising her will against it. There were things she wanted settled first.

Fergus was sitting beside her, his eyes on her face. She had said feebly, "You needn't come, Fergus," but his look had silenced her.

She said now in a matter-of-fact voice that was only breathless in patches when the pain was bad, "Fergus, if anything happens to me will you make what arrangements you can for Peter and Teresa? I haven't got anyone to appoint as their guardian. We have no relations at all. Would you look after their interests? Perhaps someone in Corriefeld would board them. They love

it. They need a settled background. I've made my will in their favour. Mr. Gillingham has it. He and his partner are the trustees."

Fergus said in a level voice, "You won't go under, Jeannie. In Dunedin hospital you have the best the Dominion can offer. The Medical School is there, you know. But I promise you I would take them. Lachie and I, with Elizabeth's help. Agreed?" She could only nod. "But nothing is going to happen."

She closed her eyes against a bad spasm of pain, opened them, to say, in answer to the wretchedness in his, "Fergus, you're not to worry about what happened this morning. It in no way contributed to this. Do you understand?"

He swallowed, nodded.

"Besides, Fergus, it wasn't ... " She paused, winded as a bad spasm came on, clung to his hand. Things were getting a bit hazy. Suddenly she said, "Oh, that's better, the pain has suddenly gone. Isn't that good?"

Fergus's eyes met Elizabeth's. *Good?* It meant peritonitis. Jeannie suddenly succumbed to the drug.

She didn't know any of the rest of it, the appalling bad luck that dogged them. Taieri Airport getting near . . . shrouded in thick, ground-hugging mist. . . news on the radio that all planes were being diverted to Oamaru . . . then being instructed that Dunedin itself was clear of fog and an emergency landing could be made on Forbury trotting-ground where the ambulance would be waiting.

Elizabeth and Fergus with a chill in their hearts. The plane itself having trouble with its landing-gear, circling round and round, the trouble suddenly ironing itself out, and then, to the great relief of the praying spectators, making a perfect landing.

There was a doctor and a nurse with the ambulance, a quick transfer, then the hospital routine.

Fergus said to Elizabeth as they waited, "You'll not get back Elizabeth. They're grounding that plane. And none will go from Taieri today."

She said, "Neither will you, Fergus."

He shoved his hands in his pockets. "I shouldn't in any case. She has no one else."

Elizabeth said, "I shall go and ring Lachie. He could take the children tonight. They love him and they would be better with him than with any strange woman."

"Yes. They're going to feel this terribly. Peter got quite panicky one night after they first came because Jeannie had a headache. He said she was never sick. I suppose losing first their father and then their mother, they cling to Jeannie as their only relative."

Elizabeth nodded. "Yes . . . and in any case Jeannie is the sort people would lean on . . . dependable, truthful, strong in spirit."

Fergus looked at her oddly, she thought. "Is she, Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth was shocked, indignant. "Fergus MacGregor! There isn't any question of it. Good heavens, just because you had an experience like that with Cecily Chalmers you don't have to judge all women by her."

Fergus said nothing, but Elizabeth didn't apologize. She had a feeling he wasn't offended.

She said quietly, "Even Neville, lightweight though he is, recognizes Jeannie's intrinsic worth. I've never liked Neville much—don't like any of the Olivers—but lately I've thought that had he met someone like Jeannie long ago he'd have had the makings of a decent husband. As it is I give him credit for recognising her for what she is."

"What do you mean, Elizabeth?"

It was a more intimate conversation than they had ever had. But somehow, in this bare hospital ante-room, they seemed to be stripped of superficial things and down to elementals.

"That night at the concert. . . heavens, it was only the night before last. It seems an age ago, when he sang that song to her—he did, you know—I thought it was the most sincere gesture I ever saw him make. I couldn't help applauding him inwardly for having such good taste."

She paused and added, "And especially for recognizing that she's that sort."

Fergus, puzzled, looked at her.

She continued: "—'Where e'er you tread the blushing flow'rs shall rise, and all things flourish—It appeals to me, of course, because I work with flowers all day long, but it had in it the essence of something I read long ago

... by Ruskin, I think ... that The path of a good woman is indeed strewn with flowers, but they rise behind her steps, not before them. I can well imagine Jeannie's footsteps have taken her a hard way, but— there will have been flowers for the ones who followed her."

Elizabeth suddenly burst into tears. Fergus put his arm about her as they sat on the stiff leather couch.

"Elizabeth, don't. She'll pull through.  
She must. The children need her."

Elizabeth said, "It's not that . . . it's just that she's only twenty-two and she's never had any fun till now, yet she's always so gay of heart, thinking always of Peter and Teresa, never of herself. Jeannie would be horrified if she knew how much Teresa has told me. I just can't head that child off. I wouldn't mind this risk if I thought she'd had any sort of life at all. It isn't right that any life should be all sacrifice."

Fergus had gathered her hands in his. "Oh, Elizabeth! Yet you had that sort of life. And won through."

"Yes, but one doesn't want others to walk the same hard way."

"But if Jeannie has the same light heart as you she'll have found her compensations too, Elizabeth, won't she?" He smiled, rather diffidently. "This seems to be the night for confidences. You said you always thought of that particular quotation when you thought of Jeannie Fraser ... Do you know the one that fits Elizabeth Goldie? No? It's 'Werena ma hert licht I wad dee.' But you never laid your burden down and died, my dear, you were gay and merry and you carried on. And I think when Rossiter Forbes comes home—"

Elizabeth stopped him, her hand against his lips.

"No, Fergus, no. I thought something like that too. I thought that when he was away he would write long, wonderful letters. He is quite a letter-writer, you know. His cousin over at Alexandra has shown me one or two. But to me—never more than an open postcard. It was merely wishful thinking on my part. But I can take it. I have my garden, and my children. I think that when Rossiter comes back I'll go up to Wanganui for a long visit to Alan. His wife is a kindred Spirit."

After that there was silence for a long time. Only the clock ticking away the minutes . . . minutes that might mean Jeannie Fraser hadn't climbed up out of the valley of the shadow.. . .

They brought them word she had come through the operation and was as well as could be expected. They brought them tea and sandwiches too.

Fergus excused himself, went to the phone, came back. "I've let Lachie know she's through. Peter was sitting up with him, but they put Teresa to bed. I've rung the Leviathan. You're to spend the night there, Elizabeth. They may let us have a peep at her shortly. Then you must go to the hotel in a taxi."

"What about you, Fergus, won't you be coming too?"

He shook his head. "No, not tonight I'll stay here, just in case. They—they have her on the seriously ill list . . . but not the dangerously ill one."

Presently they saw her in a small room where a nurse was specialling her. She lay there, propped up against many pillows, breathing heavily, completely oblivious.

"Still under the anaesthetic, of course," said the sister. They came out into the passage. "Are you her next-of-kin?" asked the sister, looking from one to the other.

"I am," said Fergus firmly. "She is an orphan, with a school-age brother and sister. But I'm her only adult relation. I'm her fiancee."

Elizabeth didn't bat an eyelid. And presently Fergus was allowed to take up his vigil on the leather couch while Elizabeth went to get what rest she could at the hotel.

AFTER a conference with Fergus next day she went back by bus to Corriefeld.

"And you, Fergus?" she asked.

"I shall stay here till she's on the mend, of course."

Elizabeth was well on the way to Corriefeld before she realized she hadn't asked Fergus whether he was Jeannie's fiance only at the hospital or in Corriefeld too. She decided to keep her own counsel about it and said nothing to anyone.

Lachie, Peter, and Teresa seemed to think it natural that Fergus should stay in Dunedin.

It was three days before Jeannie began to pick up, three days when she wandered in strange regions and knew dreams, some nightmarish, some comforting, fairytale dreams where she wandered hand in hand with Fergus through orchards afoam with blossom, pink and white blossom that never withered, never knew the cruel fingers of frost. . . . Sometimes she felt the dream was almost real, that she felt the warmth of his hand clasping hers, a hand with calloused palms.

One morning she came to full consciousness. She lifted her lashes and saw the sunlight filtering through the window. It dazzled her eyes, so she didn't lift the lashes properly, and it made a little rainbow in the room.

"I wonder if there really are pots of gold at the rainbow's end," she said quite distinctly.

A voice said, "I expect there are, Jeannie, only you must make the effort to wake up and search for them."

A voice she loved. So it *was* a dream. She could remember now ... the plane, the pain, the sudden cessation of pain, since then more pain, a haziness, the nightmares and the dreams.

Only this wasn't a nightmare. It was a dream beyond all desiring. But you always had to wake. She hoped she wouldn't wake too soon. She kept her lids closed.

She said, "It sounds like you, Fergus, but it couldn't be, could it?"

"Why couldn't it, Jeannie?"

"Because you'll have to be at the Orchards. This is Dunedin hospital and you were busy doing the Bordeaux spraying for brown rot. And yesterday you had to bring me down by plane."

"Not yesterday, Jeannie ... days ago. They are all fit and well at Strathlachan and hoping you'll be home soon. Elizabeth has moved into the homestead with the youngsters and Robert Melton is taking my place. The Bordeaux is *his* headache."

"You mean he's taking your place today while you visit me? Did you go home and come back?"

She still kept her eyes closed because she could go on dreaming that way.

"No, Jeannie, I stayed here."

Her eyes flew open.

"That's better. I began to think your lashes were glued together."

Jeannie said, "It must have cost you a packet, staying at an hotel. You must put it down on your expense sheet."

Fergus laughed, a really merry laugh. Perhaps there was relief in it. "Oh, Jeannie, you really are yourself again. Always practical. Besides, I stayed here one night. A saving like that should please your thrifty Scots nature."

"Here? What do you mean?"

"Oh, they have quite comfortable waiting rooms where anxious relatives can wait."

She smiled a little. "But you aren't an anxious relative . . . just my manager."

At that moment a nurse came in. "You'll have to scram," she said to Fergus. "Doctor is on his way. And from the talk I heard, it looks as if our Miss Fraser is on the mend." She paused, and said with a wicked twinkle, "Look, I'm engaged myself. I'll whisk out for a moment ... only a moment, mind you . . . and you can say goodbye properly."

She picked up a bowl and vanished.

Jeannie looked mystified. "She—she's engaged herself, she said. What on earth is she talking about—? Oh—she thinks—" She stopped, and into her pallor flowed a clear high rose.

Fergus rose, came to the bedside. "I didn't think they'd allow managers to sit beside bedsides and hold patients' hands. .. and you didn't have anyone else ... I told them I was your fiance. So don't forget it."

Jeannie swallowed. Then she said hastily, "Yes, I can see how it was."

They could hear voices nearing them. The nurse appeared again.

Fergus said to Jeannie over his shoulder with a mocking grin, "Yes, of course you see how it was . . . purely pity."

Jeannie got through the doctor's visit, and tried to bring her mind to bear upon what had just happened, but it was no use. She couldn't concentrate and fell asleep in the middle of it, only conscious of a warm feeling at the heart that somebody had cared.

Her improvement from then on was slow but steady, but with the return of health she began to worry; to remember all that had happened immediately prior to her trip to hospital.

Cecily threatening to find out why Jeannie had left Auckland so secretly... the knowledge that Cecily still cared—in her own selfish way—for Fergus and was determined to have him. Jeannie felt slightly sick at the thought that Cecily wished for Owen Chalmers' death. Then she could have his money ... and Fergus.

Cecily would stop at nothing. It was no use underestimating her. She didn't appear to have a better side to appeal to. Jeannie wondered how she was taking this—Fergus staying down here because his employer was quite alone in the world. It certainly would not help the situation.

She didn't have long to wonder. That night Fergus, visiting, said gently, "I hate to tell you this just now, but Owen Chalmers is worse. I thought that if anything should happen you might see it too suddenly in the papers."

Jeannie turned her head away, looked at the flowers on her locker, blinked. Fergus's hand came to cover hers.

"You thought a lot of your chief, didn't you, Jeannie?"

"Yes. He was the finest man I knew."

There was a silence. She knew Fergus was watching her averted face. She knew a vast regret because Owen Chalmers was dying and because he had known such disillusionment this last year or two. Yes, he had been foolish, but what a price to pay. Under her sadness for Owen himself was the bitter



unwelcome thought that soon Cecily might be free, and nothing would hold her back in her pursuit of Fergus. What a pity it should happen now, when it seemed as if Fergus was trying to resist her advances, the compulsion of his attraction to her. But Fergus must never know how much this mattered to her.

Fergus was aware of the rigidity of the fingers under his, as if Jeannie resisted with every bit of her the knowledge he had just given her. Why did she feel it so strongly?

Suddenly he said quietly, "Jeannie, don't bottle it up. Tell me, were your feelings for Owen Chalmers stronger than I guessed? I know secretaries often do find themselves ... do find within themselves a tenderness for their employers . . . thrown with them day after day . . . and if Cecily could fall for him—even if it didn't last—perhaps, in spite of his age, Owen could be fascinating."

She lay very still, her face still half-turned away. Fergus continued, "If that's so, then I admire you for cutting and running. Was this why you disappeared? As Cecily said at the party." Another pause. He added, "Because if that's so I can understand why you were so scathing to me. You would have high standards . . . you wouldn't play around with another woman's husband. And in that case I'm sorry that I ever sneered at you for lack of experience, of understanding."

She twisted round then, looked him full in the face. "Fergus, I can't take credit for that. Nothing is farther from the truth. I was never in the least in love with Owen Chalmers. I did hero-worship him. He was all that an employer should be." She wiped away the sudden tears with the back of her hand said in a bewildered tone, "I can't understand it . . . that's three of you thinking the same in a short space of time, Neville, Cecily, you."

Fergus's keen eyes met hers. His mind fastened on the one important thing.

"Cecily! When could she say it? After that first encounter at the party you went home. And you were taken into hospital the very day after we went to Pakiwaitara. Since then she has been called back to Auckland. They've all gone. I mean to know, Jeannie. Out with it."

Jeannie said slowly, "The morning I was taken ill. I tried to tell you on the plane, but I was too ill. She rang me up and asked me to meet her on the track up to Sunset Gully. *She* was in the car—not Neville."

She hoped desperately he would not ask her what Cecily wanted her for.

Incredulity was uppermost in Fergus's eyes. "You met *Cecily*?" His look changed, held belief. "And when you went behind the rock you weren't waving?"

Jeannie's lop-sided dimple flashed out. "It wasn't a romantic farewell, Fergus. I was being sick!"

He grinned back at her in a fashion that made Jeannie realize how good it would be to have his wholehearted comradeship. To meet him on terms not clouded by suspicion, distrust, resentment. Then his eyes narrowed. "I had another reason for thinking you had been with Neville in the car. Remember?" He didn't name it, but flicked the corner of her mouth.

Colour, vivid and shaming, flooded up into Jeannie's pale cheeks. She closed her lips.

Fergus studied her closely. Then he said quite calmly, "All right, I get it. I've experienced Cecily's vixenish temper too."

Jeannie knew a moment of wild alarm. He would follow this up by asking what she had said to make Cecily so angry. She didn't want to lie to Fergus. And for once there was candour between them. And she couldn't help feeling femininely glad he had spoken of Cecily like that. Perhaps there was hope that—

Fergus said, "Of course Cecily wouldn't believe your protestations about not caring for Owen. She would also resent your air of integrity." He grinned. "I can't help thinking you probably held your own, Miss Fraser."

Jeannie knew relief. He thought Cecily had merely tackled her about Owen. What a mix-up!

Fergus said, "Oh, Jeannie, I—what can I say? Just because I was so flaming and rushing home thinking you were ill the night of the party, and seeing you in Neville's arms, I jumped to the conclusion when I saw you that morning in his car that you'd taken up where you had left off, a day or so later. Especially when I thought you'd invited him to join us at

Pakiwaitara ... You hadn't? No. And I bawled you out and you were really ill. Listen . . . oh, damn that time- bell!"

Jeannie said, "It's the second one, I'm afraid."

"But tell me ... what did Cecily mean about you disappearing? If it wasn't that you had discovered you cared for Owen, what was it?"

Jeannie wasn't quite sure yet that she would be wise to tell Fergus. If he and the solicitor disapproved, they might set things in train, and she and the children were a hundred miles apart.

She dropped her eyes and said stiffly, "I'm sorry; but it was entirely a private matter."

In the significant silence that followed, Jeannie's nurse put her head around the door.

"I give you exactly ten seconds," she said with her gamin grin. "Not a second more. You can easily manage one for the road in that time." She vanished.

Their eyes met. No more time for discussion. Jeannie knew relief. This would give her time to think things out.

Fergus stood up, bent over the bed, said, with a wicked gleam in the eyes she had once thought hard, "Pity to disappoint that romantically-minded nurse, don't you think?" and brushed his lips against hers.

He went home next day. First to pay a brief visit to hospital, not in visiting hours because he had to go by bus and it left early.

His visit was ill-timed—as far as he was concerned, if he wanted to find out more, because it was just before the doctors' rounds and they said he could say goodbye and no more.

Fergus said briefly, "Robert Melton rang last night. He wants me on the spot. But Elizabeth and I will be down to see you and on Sunday we'll bring the youngsters. They'll want to see you now to reassure themselves you're really on the mend. Elizabeth said she'll bring down some of your nighties—she was on the phone last night—so you can get out of those ghastly hospital ones."

And he was gone.

Jeannie thought she would have no one in the visiting hours then, but the solicitor's wife came in, a vivacious, friendly sort in direct contrast to her stiff, formal husband.

Her chatter about Fergus, who seemed to be on visiting terms with them, was welcomed eagerly by Jeannie. It was building up in her mind a very different picture from the one she had started out with. Not that one could—quite—wipe out the circumstances of their first meeting, but since then there had been evidence that Fergus was not desirous of continuing the association.

She had a daily note from Elizabeth, full of chat about the village and village folk, the children, the orchards, her books. Some of the people Jeannie had worked with for the concert came in to see her when in town shopping, others sent flowers, magazines. Jeannie felt Corriefeld had accepted her.

She enjoyed the Sunday visit, but the children were there the whole time with Fergus and Elizabeth. Just as well, Jeannie told herself.

She said briefly as they were leaving, "Have you heard how Mr. Chalmers is?"

"Much the same. I rang Mrs. Oliver yesterday. She said Cecily is quite worn out with the strain of it. Mrs. Oliver had flown home for some things. She's flying back tomorrow."

Their eyes met. Neither pair gave anything away.

Jeannie said wistfully, "Tell me how Strathlachan is looking. I hate to miss any time of the year."

Elizabeth answered, "The hawthorn hedges are red with berry. The rowans on the hillsides are thick and bright. The Maoris say it's a sign we shall have a severe winter."

"Och, aye, I hope so," said Teresa. "Ye ken I've never seen snow, Jeannie lass. I'm fair longing for it."

They all laughed. Teresa took it with equanimity. Fergus said, "She's so much with Lachie at the moment. But we've agreed she's not to copy Lachie in all his utterances . . . haven't we, Tess?"

Tess's tawny eyes laughed up at him. "We have an' all," she said solemnly, and rubbed her small carcase reminiscently in the region designed for chastisement.

Jeannie looked a question. Fergus said, "She told us she thought maths was a 'bluidy awfu' subject to be teaching weans."

Jeannie bit her lip to hold the laughter in. Teresa turned to her sister. "It's odd, though, isn't it, Jeannie, bloody doesn't sound half so bloody when you say it the Scots way, 'bluidy'. But I admit that bloody isn't a nice word. Unless you are saying something is bl—" She didn't get any further with that one because Fergus's hand covered her mouth.

"That will be more than enough out of you, Teresa Fraser. Your sister will be thinking you've got right out of hand. I've never known anyone relish words so much . . . especially the bad ones." He removed his hand, pinched her chin. "You'll see plenty of snow in Central Otago even in a mild winter, poppet. We'll take you skating on the Manorburn Dam, and if you're very good we may even go to Queenstown for skiing on Coronet Peak. And there's curling at Naseby. Even close at hand there's a marvellous toboggan run down the far side of Piper's Hill."

Piper's Hill.

When they had gone Jeannie thought wistfully how ideal it would be if only the threat of any action Cecily might take didn't hang over her head. But at least at the moment Cecily would have enough on her plate without bothering with private detectives to find out why she had left Auckland without leaving an address.

The next time Fergus came Elizabeth was with him again. She said to Jeannie, "I've been working in your garden. You were getting it so trim I thought it was a pity it went back. I've planted daffodils under those trees . . . the birches. You told me you were going to do that. But what about all those primroses you'd broken up from that sodden clump by the back door? I heeled them in. Where would you like them?"

Jeannie glanced at Fergus. "I was going to ask you if you would allow me to plant them under the trees on Owls' Roost. People would get a glimpse of them from the main road then, and we have so few wild flowers by the roadsides in New Zealand. Or would it not be practicable, Fergus?"

He laughed. "They're *your* trees, Jeannie."

"But you're my manager. I rely on you."

Their eyes met, looked away.

"No reason why you shouldn't have them there. They may get blackened at times if we have the fire-pots going in frosts, but they won't do the trees any harm. And that particular spot is sheltered, doesn't light up on that hill very often. It should look charming. Elizabeth and I will get them in. What else would you like there? Crocuses? Daffodils? Glory-of-the-snow? Right."

Jeannie said quickly, "Oh, leave them for this year. It's a big job. You must be back in your work as it is. This has disrupted things."

"Oh, it would have been worse had it been in the picking season."

Her convalescence was longer than she had anticipated. There were complications, days when she had a lot of pain, and various setbacks. Fergus was in Dunedin more frequently than could have been convenient, she knew, though he assured her he always attended to a good deal of business with Mr. Gillingham at this time of year.

He had not pursued any more queries about her reason for disappearing. Was it because he realized it was her own affair, or that she wasn't well enough to be bothered with it now? Jeannie took the respite gladly.

She rather wished she could tell Nurse Sullivan they were not engaged. She often teased Jeannie, dressing her up in her prettiest nightgowns for Fergus's visits, brushing her hair till it shone, saying, "My, aren't some people lucky ... my Mike, he's just a big gangling gingerheaded Irishman ... not that I'd change him for a film star, mind you ... but Mr. MacGregor ... now there's a heart-throb."

She said diffidently to Fergus one night, "I think I really ought to tell her we're not engaged. I hate deceiving people."

He had chuckled. "Oh, it would be a pity to frustrate her romantic thoughts about us—what does it matter?"

"But it could spread ... and cause talk ... even get to Corriefeld."

He shrugged. "Won't matter. If some did hear it from one of the nurses ... a pretty remote chance at that. ... the folk up there would think it was only exaggerated gossip."

Jeannie let it go. Now she was back in the wards, relatively unimportant because no longer on the seriously ill list.

One morning she had a visitor.

"Aren't you important?" said Nurse Sullivan, straightening her pillows. "A visit from the Press, no less."

"Good heavens, what for?"

He was a reporter from the *Star*. He had an engaging way with him.

"I'm doing a feature article on the way planes are used in and about Otago and Southland. Rescue trips among the ranges; helicopters dropping food to tramping parties stranded in the bush, mercy trips, etc. I thought you might give the patient's eye view of your rushed trip. I was up getting some dope from the fruit-packing planes at Roxburgh and the pilot who brought you down mentioned the affair. I'd forgotten it. Mind if I ask you a few questions? And later on the photographer will be in to take a picture of you. Okay?"

Yes, it was okay. Jeannie's recollections of the last part of the trip were nil, but she could remember up to the time the pain left her.

Nurse Sullivan was thrilled. She tied Jeannie's hair back with an apricot ribbon, took the most glamorous flowers in the ward for her locker. Stood and beamed.

"To round off the article," she said to the reporter, "you ought to have her fiance in the picture with her. He's really something. He could give you more local colour too. He knew more about it. She was out to it. He never left the hospital. Walked up and down; pestered the lives out of everybody for news, couldn't eat, wouldn't sit down."

"This is simply grand," said the newsman, scribbling madly. "Human interest . . . that's the stuff. A tear-jerker. And a hint of romance is a godsend. Now if only it had happened on the eve of your wedding it would have made an even better story."

Jeannie was dismayed, indignant, scared. Where were they heading?

"It would have been horrible," she said. "I certainly wouldn't want it to happen on

my wedding eve . . . who would? Please stop. This is more than half local colour. Nurse Sullivan is a born romantic."

"Miss Fraser said, Thank goodness it didn't happen on my wedding eve.' When are you thinking of getting married, Miss Fraser?"

"I'm not," choked Jeannie. "I mean—I mean the date isn't fixed." She sat up and said firmly, "Now, look here, you mustn't put anything in about that at all. My engagement has nothing whatever to do with the mercy trip. Nurse Sullivan is in love herself and can't think about anything else. You can cut that bit out."

The reporter protested. "Have a heart, Miss Fraser. The public will just lap this up. How would you like to be a reporter and have people block you the instant you get on to something interesting? To have an anxious fiance pacing up and down the corridor outside the operating theatre would be just the thing."

"Oh, not the operating theatre," giggled Nurse Sullivan. "You must have the facts right. He was in—"

Jeannie broke in firmly, "It doesn't matter where he was. This article, as far as I can see it, is about the unorthodox trips even a fruit freight plane can make, and its mercy trip ended when it met the ambulance."

"Spoil-sport," said the reporter, and at that moment, Nurse, hearing noises in the corridor, investigated and said, "Mother of Mercy, here's the matron. You'll have to scram, young man."

By this time Jeannie was up an hour or two a day, sitting in a chair on a sunny balcony and getting her strength back. She got up immediately after Matron's visit and went to Sister.

"Sister, would it be possible for me to put a toll call through to my home? It's rather urgent."

Yes, it was possible. Sister instructed a probationer to explain to Jeannie how to connect up with the hospital exchange for an outside call, and Jeannie made the call urgent rates and got through without delay.

Fergus, in the sheds, was most amazed to hear her voice.

She said in a low voice, "Listen, Fergus, I don't want to be too outspoken on the phone. . . local line and all that. . .but I just had a reporter in asking details about the emergency trip and so on. I gave just bare details, but Nurse Sullivan was in and she said to her way of thinking you ought to be in . . . you know, the real hero type, tall, dark, handsome and so on. Well, all



right, no dark, but you know what I mean. Fergus ... do take this seriously. She's a terror. She mentioned you in your role of... well, what you told the hospital. I don't want to say more than that."

"You mean she said I was your fiance?"

"Fergus! I was being discreet on the phone, and now—"

He started to laugh.

Jeannie was both indignant and serious. "Fergus, it isn't funny. I tried to get him to finish off the incident at Forbury Racecourse, where it should end. He wants to continue, romantic interest and so on. It's going to land us in a spot of embarrassment. Before I could wring from him a promise not to use that item, Matron arrived and little Sullivan whisked him out of the ward. Fergus, will you do something about it?"

"What, for instance?"

Jeannie sighed. "Get on to the *Star* right away. Ask for that reporter and tell him it isn't true. They can say the manager of the orchards accompanied me, I think you'll have to tell him why we pretended that.. . it's going to be in the Saturday paper, one of the feature pages, so you'll have time."

She went back to bed feeling distinctly uneasy. Fergus hadn't taken it very seriously, but she hoped that, on reflection, he would realize it wouldn't do at all. That he wouldn't really want public notice drawn to something he had invented on the spur of the moment, born of a natural sympathy for a girl who was singularly lacking in relatives.

Jeannie didn't expect anyone to see her on the Saturday, not in early May, with blue- stone spraying of the stone and pip fruits starting and cultivation facing them.

Nurse Sullivan saw her quietly reading while the other patients gossiped with friends and relations. She came along, dropped an early edition of the evening paper on the bed and said, "You'll find that a darned sight more interesting than your novel, love. They've done you proud."

Jeannie opened it, saw an excellent photograph of herself, photos of the plane landing at Forbury, loading fruit at Roxburgh, arriving at its North Island markets. Her adventure was only part of the whole feature, but it seemed to Jeannie it was all in headlines. Her eyes fell on the concluding paragraphs. They said, "Miss Fraser's fiance, Mr. Fergus MacGregor, who

manages her orchard, knew far more about the trip than Miss Fraser, for she was under drugs when it was discovered that the landing gear had gone wrong. Mrs. Elizabeth Goldie, the well-known Central Otago florist and author, described their mutual anxiety to us . . . the long, endless-seeming vigil at the hospital, the ..." It was all there, plus more than a little local colour.

There was quite enough in the three paragraphs to constitute much more than a mere formal announcement of their engagement. Jeannie fell back against her pillows. She was still holding the paper but gazing into space when Fergus came in, apologizing for not being earlier.

He stood at the end of her bed, another paper, evidently read, under his arm. Jeannie felt horribly guilty for involving him in all this. Certainly he had invented the relationship, but she did feel responsible for the publicity.

Fergus said easily, "Well, they certainly wrote it up well, didn't they?"

"*Well!* Fergus, how dared they when you told them not to?"

He grinned. "Oh, I forgot. It's not their fault."

Jeannie rose to a sitting position. "You *forgot!* Oh, Fergus, how could you? It was so important. To think I could scarcely get to the phone quickly enough to ring you."

"We were frightfully busy, with routine stuff to begin with. I wanted to get the Bordeaux spraying and pruning out of the way, so I could get down for the whole weekend. I'm staying with the Gillinghams. Then all sorts of things happened. One crisis after another. So I overlooked it. Can't be helped."

"Can't be helped! But it's tantamount to announcing an engagement. Talk about public!"

Fergus laughed. "I'll be termed an opportunist."

Jeannie gazed at him uncomprehendingly. He enlarged.

"They'll think I lost no time marrying the owner. Cheaper than buying a partnership." The blue eyes were not laughing now, they were serious, watchful.

Jeannie waved an impatient, agitated hand. "Oh, no one who really knew you would think that of you, I—"

"Thank you, Jeannie. That's the first compliment you've ever paid me. So you think that even if I'm untrustworthy on other counts, I'm not a fortune-hunter."

Jeannie was still impatient. They seemed to be getting off the main issue. "No, of course not—besides, it's not in that category, is it? I mean, we just make a living, don't we? A very comfortable living but nothing fabulous. There's not much capital, just the property and the means of making money if we work hard and the seasons are good."

"Yes. But folk do know that when I came to Strathlachan I hadn't a bean."

Jeannie looked at him sharply. "I thought you told me you had an accountancy practice of your own. When you sold out wouldn't you have got a fair bit for it?"

His expression was grim. Jeannie realized, noticing it, that of late, since her illness, he hadn't worn that look so much. He had been friendly, approachable, whimsical.

He said, "I sold the practice to pay a debt—of honour. If you could call it that."

Jeannie said, "I don't want to pry, Fergus, so if you don't want to answer you needn't, and I shan't mind. But do you mean you had to sell the practice to raise money— out of grim necessity? It wasn't that you had come to the conclusion that you wanted an outdoor life? "

"That sums it up very neatly. I used up all my bank balance, my car, my practice. It wasn't even enough. I had to borrow ... privately. I had no security left."

His tone was wry. "I was a quixotic young fool, if you like. Yet at least it frees me from obligation. I'm still glad I did it. Sorry I can't go into details. It involves someone else."

Jeannie said softly, "But you have made good. It's over."

He said, "It is over. I have a modest bank balance again. I have a good car. But for a while I was poorer in other ways. I lost my belief in people."

Jeannie looked up at him. She had on an apricot nightgown in sprigged silk, and little Sullivan had tied her hair back with an apricot ribbon. Her greenish eyes were soft.

"But you've got past that stage too, haven't you, Fergus? You believe in people again?"

Her eyes held his.

"Yes, Jeannie. I've got back my faith." He turned as some visitors came into the ward. "Ah, here are the Gillinghams. I'm having the weekend with them."

Mr. Gillingham had some late roses for Jeannie. She buried her face in the fragrant sheaf.

Jeannie looked past them to the entrance to the ward. "It looks as if there are still more emergencies. What a time they've had! There are a couple of beds down the centre now."

Fergus said, "Perhaps that will mean they'll let you out sooner."

On the heels of that remark came Sister. "Can you spare me a few moments, Mr. MacGregor?"

When he came back he said, "They would let you out now if your home was in Dunedin. You aren't fit for the long drive yet. But they say you should be up to it on Monday."

Mrs. Gillingham said crisply, "Oh, Jeannie can come to us. And you can take her home on Monday, Fergus. I'd love it."

Jeannie protested ... it would be too much for Mrs. Gillingham, too short a notice ... All protests were swept aside.

Mr. Gillingham said mildly, "I find it much easier just to let Mollie have her own way. Too, too exhausting to argue with her. And useless. We would love to have you, my dear. I could show you my rose-garden. I always leave a few unpruned till spring so we have some roses for most of the winter."

He smiled at her. Jeannie smiled back. At first she had thought this greyish, desiccated spare man rather devoid of human feelings. But she was getting quite fond of him. Some day she might even pluck up the courage to ask him how she stood legally with regard to the children. But not quite yet.

Jeannie said suddenly, "Fergus ... I believe all I've got is that lemon linen overall. How frightful! I should have told you some time ago to get Elizabeth to hunt me out some clothes."

Fergus grinned, "The Gillinghams won't mind the overall."

Mrs. Gillingham said eagerly, "You would be about the same size as my daughter. She left quite a bit of stuff at home when she got married, and went to live at Tauranga. I wonder if someone—one of the nurses perhaps—would lend you a coat. It's chilly outside and the hospital is so warm with the central heating."

Nurse Sullivan would and did. Jeannie was almost sorry to say goodbye to them all. Then they were in the Gillinghams' car, with Fergus's following behind.

Up Queen's Drive they went, that lovely winding way of native bush that girdles the gracious hills of Dunedin, to Granville Terrace in Belleknowes.

Jeannie was charmed with the house, a two-storey cream wooden one with green snubbed gables and a walled-in garden where it was still December, not May. Flowers rioted everywhere, loath to cease their summer blooming.

They insisted on Jeannie lying down first on a couch in the upstairs sun-room. They used this room a lot. It had enormous windows and looked right out over the wharves and the city area right up the harbour to Taiaroa Head, and across the Peninsula to the open sea where great waves broke against White Island.

They had a cup of tea, then Mrs. Gillingham, chattering, led the way to her daughter's bedroom.

Jennifer Gillingham must have had a lavish wardrobe if these were her discards. Jeannie decided to pick something simple, but Mrs. Gillingham wouldn't hear of it. She pounced on an emerald silk, stiff and gleaming. It had self-embroidery at the deep neck- pine and the cuffs of the three-quarter sleeves, and a cummerbund in the same stiff silk.

"Couldn't be a more perfect fit. Jennifer was slim and not very tall too . . . She can't get into this now—quite. Let me see . . ."

She stepped back, head on one side, considering Jeannie. "The shoes may be a shade big, but with these bits of frivolity, just a sole and a few straps, it won't matter. There's a stole here . . . you'll need something, and a stole is so romantic . . . Oh, no, just a moment." She whisked out of the room.

She was back in a moment with a ruby-red shawl, new, up-to-the-minute.

"This is mine, it would be more fashionable still and warmer to boot. And here is a necklace and earrings to match."

Jeannie looked at them. "Mrs. Gillingham, no. Those are valuable."

Mollie Gillingham chuckled. "Well, I'm not expecting you to make off with them. Don't be absurd, child. I'm loving this. Arthur isn't a bit interested in clothes. I do miss Jennifer for that."

Jeannie gave in.

Mrs. Gillingham was an amazing mixture of vivaciousness, efficiency and tenacity. She served a delightful dinner she had cooked herself.

Jeannie, meeting Fergus's eyes as she and the solicitor's wife entered the room, flushed becomingly.

The solicitor had the evening paper in his hands. "Mollie, you'll love this . . . look." He pointed to the feature article.

She seized it. Mr. Gillingham said dryly, "Perhaps the last two or three paragraphs will interest you most."

Thus cautioned, Mollie skipped the rest, read the end and looked up with starry eyes remarkably beautiful in anyone her age.

"You—you're engaged!" She looked from Fergus to Jeannie. "Oh, how satisfying. I thought—I hoped—Fergus, why didn't you tell me?" Her eyes darted to

Jeannie's left hand. "But tell me when it— where is your ring, my dear? ... I had no idea it had actually ..."

Jeannie looked helplessly at Fergus, but evidently her confusion was merely taken for shyness.

Fergus said calmly, "Oh, we'd just become engaged when Jeannie was taken ill. We'd not had time to come to Dunedin to choose the ring. We'll rectify that on Monday if Jeannie is fit enough."

Mollie Gillingham said, "I've not had such a thrill since Jennifer's wedding." She looked at Fergus. "And it's time you were married and settled down. I've told you so dozens of times. This just bears out what I've always said to young people, when they have ups and downs in their romantic life. There is almost always a happy ending waiting them if they will just be patient. And you're very fortunate this time, Fergus. Jeannie is just right for you. Not a bit like—"

Mr. Gillingham said hastily, "Let's go in to dinner. I'm afraid Mollie is about to commit a *faux pas*." He gave her a fond look and offered Jeannie his arm.

Jeannie could scarcely look at Fergus across the well-appointed dinner-table. Her head was burnished against the high-backed chair, the ruby shawl and emerald frock bright in the firelight that reflected in the panelling and in the copper and pewter of the room.

Fergus was perfectly at ease. No one would have guessed he had got himself involved in a situation that would take some unravelling.

Mr. Gillingham said, after the meal was over, "Fergus is going to help my wife with the dishes. We have no help over the weekend. It will let me off a chore I'm not fond of at the best of times. I have a little business to discuss with Miss Fraser."

Mollie protested, "Arthur! You aren't going to continue to be formal, are you? We've called Fergus by his Christian name for years and years. You—"

"My dear, you ought to know by now that I proceed at my own pace. I do *not* rush in where angels fear to tread."

Mollie chuckled. "That's a neat way of calling your wife a fool, Arthur. Never mind, but the time you've had Jeannie round your roses tomorrow I daresay it will be accomplished. Come on, Fergus, let's leave them to their deeds and affidavits and whereas and a fore-mentioned ... I want to talk with you."

That last little phrase made Jeannie uneasy. Mollie Gillingham was evidently an incurable romantic. She would want to enter right into what she thought was an ideal romance ... and Jeannie would not know what Fergus was telling her. Heaven send she made no slips later. What if Mollie Gillingham asked Fergus exactly when they got engaged, and later on Jeannie muffed it? She and Fergus must compare notes. But when?

The dishes seemed to take a long time, but finally, the two appeared again. Millie was saying as they entered, "Well . . . I'll ring Mr. Dick right now. He'll enter into the spirit of it splendidly, I'm quite, quite sure." She beamed and turned to go.

Her husband's voice arrested her. "Mollie! Have you been meddling? You have the look of it."

Mollie popped a saucy face around the door. "Fergus will tell you. Not meddling, love, helping." She disappeared.

Fergus crossed to the hearth, leaned against the mantelpiece, said, "She's ringing up a jeweller she knows. She was completely horrified to know Jeannie developed this the very day we became engaged and had no time to buy a ring. She thinks Jeannie will have felt cheated all this month in hospital . . . engaged, yet with no outward evidence of it. She's sure it will be too much for her to go shopping for it on Monday morning, and sure her friend the jeweller will be as romantically anxious as she is."

His eyes held a twinkle as they met Jeannie's dismayed ones.

Jeannie said, "But—but perhaps he'll be going out. He may have seats for the theatre ... or be away from home." It was like clutching at a straw.

Mr. Gillingham said mildly, "If I know my wife, the jeweller will even find himself missing the first half of the programme and telling himself he doesn't mind."

Jeannie said, "But—but, Fergus—"

The door opened, Mollie's head appeared. "What kind of a ring would you prefer, Jeannie? You must have thought it out all this time in hospital... ?"

Jeannie sat dumb. Fergus crossed quickly to her, bent over her, said, "Diamonds? Or something coloured? I'd like emeralds for you, myself. They'll match your eyes. Or rubies."

Jeannie swallowed. His eyes challenged her, commanded her to play up. "I'd love an emerald," she said faintly.

Mollie said, "Perhaps you'd like to speak to him yourself, Fergus. Price and so on."

*Price!* Jeannie felt it was a nightmare. Fergus's modest bank balance! It was involving him in far more than he had intended, when purely as a protective gesture for someone curiously bereft of relations he had pretended to an attachment that was now a hollow mockery and an embarrassment.

Fergus in turn disappeared. Jeannie thought crossly that it was all his fault anyway. She had relied on his scotching that report. Poor Fergus, she thought, relenting. She remembered their conversation earlier. He'd called himself a quixotic young fool. A debt of honour. Perhaps he made a habit of



getting himself involved. Could that mean that even his association with Cecily was another instance of this? Jeannie caught at the idea hopefully.. ..

In the interval before the jeweller appeared Fergus seemed so much at ease that Jeannie felt his experience with the drama group must have benefited him immensely. She herself felt shy, awkward, ill at ease.

Mollie whisked her husband away when she heard the ring at the door, admitted Mr. Dick, showed him in, left the three of them to it.

The jeweller was just as delighted as Mrs. Gillingham had predicted he would be. Perhaps the solicitor's wife had that effect on people—willy-nilly they entered into her enthusiasms.

The ring was chosen. A single emerald, a large one. Jeannie felt it was far beyond Fergus's means. Perhaps later they could come to some financial arrangement about it. Because sooner or later this farce of an engagement must come to an end. They would break it off by mutual consent. And Jeannie would pay for the ring then, because she had an idea she would like to keep it. Not to wear it, of course, when everything was over, but to put it aside and sometimes to take it out, and remember.

The ring chosen, the jeweller packed up the rest, accepted Fergus's cheque, said briskly, "Mrs. Gillingham has asked me to stay and toast the engagement. My wife is coming in too, she's with Mollie now . . . but" (with a twinkle) 'I'll leave you for a few moments while you put it on.'

Fergus and Jeannie were left looking at each other. Fergus suddenly smiled.

"Jeannie Fraser, stop looking as if you've been dragged to the altar ... or to the stake. We've got to see it through. Don't let's disappoint Mollie. We would have enjoyed all this if—"

"If we had loved each other," said Jeannie, and her tone was flat.

Fergus put out his hands to her.

"Will you see it through? Enter into the spirit of it? Later we can let it fizzle out. Be a sport."

He picked up her hand, slid the ring on, stood looking at it for a moment. The side of his mouth quirked up.

"May there be no regrets about this ... about this mad prank . . . now or ever, Jeannie."

His arms went round her, his lips were on hers.

Nothing could have stopped Jeannie from responding. Not dismay at where Fergus's kindly gesture had landed them, not even the fear of what Cecily would do if she heard about it before this bogus engagement was broken off. This was *her* moment. One she would always remember, Fergus's arms about her, his breath warm on her cheek, the virile masculinity of his embrace, the feel of his ring on her finger.

They drew apart. Fergus laughed. "Much better," he said. "You now have the look of a newly-engaged girl.. . a just-kissed look." He caught her finger-tips. "You will play up, won't you? It would be downright dashing to disappoint anyone now."

Jeannie nodded.

The jeweller and his wife were old friends of the Gillinghams and they stayed for the evening, but in deference to Jeannie's recent discharge from hospital they left early.

Mr. Gillingham was amused at his wife. "She hasn't enjoyed anything so much for years. Anybody would think she had engineered the whole thing."

Jeannie looked hastily away from the twinkle in Fergus's eyes. How true. But for Mollie Gillingham they might yet have laughed off the newspaper article as a little journalistic licence.

Mollie slipped her arm through that of her stiff and starched husband. "Now come on, Arthur, my pet ... remember you were young once yourself. Hard to believe now, of course," she added wickedly. She turned a laughing face over her shoulder as they went out of the door. "Still, when we're quite alone ... even now ... Arthur is quite—exciting. Fergus, I hate to say it, but don't keep her up too late. She may have a reaction tomorrow."

When Fergus turned back towards Jeannie she was standing by the hearth, her back towards him, looking down on the dying embers.

He put a friendly hand on her shoulder. "It's no good being embarrassed, Jeannie. We must just make the best of it. Let's have a yarn .. . about the estate. And in a few moments I shall obediently see you to your room."

That made it easier. They mounted the stairs together in this lovely, gracious home. Their shoulders brushed. They came to Jeannie's door. A

faint, silvery light came from the moon over the harbour as it shone on them from a landing window.

As Fergus put his arms about Jeannie she stiffened, put a hand against his chest. "No, Fergus, that's not at all necessary. We only play up to what people expect when we're not alone."

He took her hand away, kept it in his behind her back. From the force of his hold Jeannie knew struggle was useless.

She saw his lips twist cynically, a hard gleam come into his eyes.

"Don't be absurd, Jeannie. You know I'm a bounder . . . you knew it from the start. Naturally I take advantage of this intriguing situation."

He kissed her thoroughly, let her go.

Jeannie opened her door, closed it without a goodnight, and was in bed in five minutes, utterly exhausted, and she slept without dreaming till wakened by her breakfast tray.

Sunday seemed to pass like a dream. There was morning service in beautiful First Church on Bell Hill. Jeannie had been asked if she would prefer to rest, but she felt she would like to attend worship. She had an unreal feeling the whole time, as if this ought to be normal. But it wasn't, she was sitting here in church beside Fergus, his ring on her finger, his voice joining hers in the singing of the Old Hundredth Psalm, here in this city where just over a hundred years ago Thomas Burns had ministered to his flock and built a new life in a new land, free from the religious restrictions of the old. It didn't seem long ago. New Zealand history was so recent.

This was what life ought to be . . . only against that was the fact that this engagement was only the offshoot of a chivalrous gesture on Fergus's part, and there was Cecily to be reckoned with ... Cecily who, when she heard of this engagement, would set enquiries afoot into Jeannie's reasons for leaving Auckland stealthily. There was Bertram to be reckoned with ... at the thought of a fight to retain the children, Jeannie knew the old sick feeling at the pit of her stomach.

These thoughts slipped into abeyance as she moved into the aisle, Fergus's fingers cupping her elbow. She didn't know which was the real

world, this one in which she was engaged to Fergus, or the one in which she knew it was pretence and fear of discovery haunted her.

Despite her thoughts she rallied enough to say all the right things as Mollie introduced her to their minister as Fergus's fiancée, and to the other people they met outside in the well-kept grounds.

Jeannie had a rest, then they drove along the coastline, had afternoon tea on a rocky beach. Then tea and a cosy evening round the fire in the pleasantly panelled room. Jeannie felt quite drawn to Mr. Gillingham. He wasn't quite the dry-as-dust solicitor she had imagined at first. Nobody married to Mollie Gillingham could be. Jeannie guessed he was secretly proud of his lovable, impulsive wife.

When Fergus and Mollie were doing the tea dishes he said to Jeannie, "Little did I think when you came into my office that first day that this would be the solution. Do you remember me warning you that Fergus might not take too kindly to working for a young woman? Your godmother would have been very pleased about this. Together you will make a real success of Strathlachan. It was an exceptionally good season last year." He added hastily, "Of course we only count on one good season in five." Jeannie hid a smile.

"I know," she said gravely. "It would never do to spend rashly because of one good season. You need capital behind you, and also to put back money into the property all the time, improving. Fergus is a splendid manager, so sincere. He takes no risks."

"Aye, he's a fine fellow. I admire him. He made such a comeback after that accident. He's never touched alcohol since. And it beggared him. Good often comes out of evil. Not that evil is wrought by God to bring good out of it—that's a terrible belief—but God is never mocked. In spite of it all He brings new growth out of devastation. And but for the accident Fergus might have married Cecily Oliver and ruined his life." He smiled. "And all the time you were waiting." He sounded profoundly satisfied. It was most complimentary.

Jeannie said nothing. She was out of her depth. The solicitor must suppose she knew all her fiancée's past.

He continued, "Best thing that could have happened, to marry someone with a level head on her shoulders, someone who didn't shirk the responsibility of bringing up a brother and sister ... oh yes, Fergus has told me all about you. Someone who didn't let a little bit of newly-acquired prosperity go to her head but still practises thrift and economy. Solicitors see so much of the snares people get their financial affairs into.. .always living beyond their means. . . so I appreciate someone like you. Fergus is a fortunate man."

Jeannie felt a glow at her heart. None of this would last.

Cecily would blast this comfortable belonging feeling to bits as soon as she was able, but for the present it was wonderful. And she needn't worry over Fergus's manner of kissing her last night. It was only that he still naturally—even though she had tried to convey to him it was forgotten—resented the circumstances of their first meeting.

Knowing Cecily as she did now, perhaps it had been only the rash impulse of a moment. . . old longings returning and swamping the social code for a destroying, dismaying moment.

From what the solicitor had said Fergus and Cecily had been in love long ago. And there was something about an accident . . . and drink.

Fergus and Mollie came in. Fergus stood on the hearth, stirred a smouldering *manuka* log to a blaze with the toe of his shoe.

Jeannie said, "Fergus, that's a bad habit. I noticed yesterday that the toe of your shoe is quite charred."

Mr. Gillingham said, "Yes, a very bad habit. With unfortunate consequences."

"Good gracious," said Mollie, "what a weighty remark about a triviality. You sounded quite accusing, Arthur."

The two men exchanged a grin which Jeannie intercepted. It had meaning in it. But what could it mean? She dismissed it, she was becoming fanciful.

**M**ONDAY morning was bright and clear, with a hint of frost. They set off early and didn't go south by Caversham but took the coast road past Brighton to Taieri Mouth, then turned inland.

"I love Central," said Fergus, "but at times I get nostalgic for the sea. Especially in summer. In winter with the snows on Mount Benger and all around the hills, and ice deep on the Manorburn, it doesn't seem to matter. It satisfies me in another way. But I always take the shore road as far as I can. I love to watch the breakers curling in."

Jeannie nodded. "Yes, we've always loved the sea as a family. Sometimes even now I'm homesick for the beaches in Fijii... bathing day in, day out. Sea-planes landing almost at our back door. The happy tropical don't-care atmosphere . . . Daddy painting, painting..."

Fergus took a quick look at her. Her voice had trembled.

"I wonder how you'll take the winters inland. The roads get ice-locked. They throw screenings over them for safety. Sometimes the frost doesn't lift all day, or the fog hangs thick and white, and if you're driving the windscreen frosts right up save where the demister is. But mostly it's a sparkling, clear, bright kind of coldness."

"It will do a lot for Teresa. She has a weak chest, but now that she is happy and has stopped fretting for Mother I don't think she'll look back."

"Some day," said Fergus, "you must tell me all about your life in Auckland with your stepfather, or would it upset you?"

"No. It wouldn't upset me, but it's all over and done with." (I hope, she added to herself.) "I don't believe in looking back. It serves no purpose."

Fergus swerved to avoid a hawk picking at a hare carcass. "You're right. I don't believe in looking back myself. I've had a good deal to look back on—but only regrets follow that. So I don't." His voice changed. "Jeannie, I've got a letter here that I can't make up my mind whether to post or not. It's a spot of meddling really. I'm as bad as Mollie. I wrote it last Thursday night,

but I thought I wouldn't post it till you read it and told me what you thought."

Jeannie's spirits soared. This sounded so ordinary. Just what you would expect a man to ask his fiancée.

Fergus continued: "Rossiter Forbes has written me the occasional letter this year while he has been travelling. So I had one to answer. I decided to slip in a hint about Elizabeth. I have an idea that Rossiter might expect her to understand he wants to put a year of travel between his former life and the next stage of it. I'm sure the next stage will include Elizabeth. But I feel she has lost heart. I think by now she has come to the conclusion that she only imagined he was ever attracted to her, and has written finis to it in her mind. Look, here's the letter. You'll be able to tell better than I if it sounds too much like a hint... or is so vague he won't tumble to it."

Jeannie read. Fergus had begun by replying to Rossiter's accounts of places visited, farming in different countries, had included some local news, then came to mention of Elizabeth.

"She has been wonderful—as always—in this emergency, taking my employer's young sister and brother to look after them. She had a very interesting lecture tour in the North Island a few weeks ago, met some very interesting people. But she is much thinner than she used to be. I should say she is steadily losing weight. Of course she lost her dog a few weeks ago . . . she may be fretting about that. I know she misses him, and despite the beauty of her Lavender Hill home she must be desperately lonely. However, I believe she is planning a trip herself soon. She may even be away before you come back, though she is very indefinite about it. I wish she would. It could do so much for her. She might even meet someone on board ship to revive her interest in life.. .. "

Jeannie laughed. "I think that's decidedly clever, Fergus. You are—in your own way—as much of a matchmaker as Mollie Gillingham. I'd say post it."

"Good. I'll air-mail it in Milton. I can only send it care of his bank in London. It will chase him round the Continent. .. but if she means anything to him at all, and I could swear she does, at least he might write and tell her he hopes she'll still be in Corriefeld when he comes back."

Winter was almost here. Autumn had slipped away during the sojourn in hospital. The hills were bare with great outcrops of naked rocks, the river was rushing and deep, the sky an incredible blue with clouds that looked like advertisements for somebody's washing-powder.

Fergus said, "You're going to Elizabeth's for a week."

"Oh, Fergus, I want to be home. I'll be all right."

He shook his head. "The doctor said you needed a very easy week, long periods of rest, not getting up till mid-morning. I know what you are—you'll be flat out as soon as you get home. By the way, you'll find a few changes ... I hope it's all right. Elizabeth helped advise. I haven't approved of you doing all this papering and painting yourself. So I had a yarn with Gillingham and we got some decorators in.

"If you want new furniture to go with it you can choose that yourself, but the hack work is done. We got a washing-machine too. By the time you would be fit to tackle things again our busy time would be upon us, so the basic work is done. Tess had a fair idea of what colours you were going to use.

And I promised her a brand-new toboggan if she didn't tell till you got home."

Jeannie chuckled. "I used to use threats— to no avail. Our secrets were never kept."

He glanced at her swiftly. "Did you have many?"

Jeannie's laughter sounded forced. "Only harmless ones. But our stepfather made sins out of such unimportant things that we did get secretive."

Fergus wondered. In his pocket was a letter from Cecily. Among other things she had said, "Be careful with the little Jeannie. There's something definitely fishy about the way she disappeared from Auckland. I'll say no more—by letter—than that it would place her on the wrong side of the law if she were found out."

As if there were something in telepathy, Jeannie asked, "How is Mr. Chalmers? Have you heard? Or is Neville still away?"



Fergus said slowly, reluctantly, Jeannie thought, "He's still away. But I did hear. Cecily wrote... he is still very ill, but not so critically at the moment. There's some talk of his coming home if he continues to rest."

Constraint settled between them. All the things they did not ask each other to explain hung in the air. They drove through the miles in silence till they stopped at Waitahuna for lunch.

Jeannie knew that some time, on the way, they must discuss this phoney engagement. She found the courage among the more rugged hills farther on.

"Fergus, we must discuss this bogus engagement of ours."

"Bogus?" His eyebrows lifted.

"Yes, of course. We were just bulldozed into it by Mrs. Gillingham. The thing snowballed. It was a kind gesture on your part— no more, I know— when you felt I was all alone in the world. Then that reporter complicated things and Mollie clinched it. I feel you ought to have taken her into our confidence. We could have bluffed out the newspaper article in Corriefeld then."

"Oh, but think what a fool I'd have felt. Besides, she was so pleased. So was Arthur."

Jeannie said dryly, "People don't get engaged simply to please other people, do they?"

"No." He seemed to be waiting for her to continue.

"Well—" Jeannie felt exasperated. He wasn't playing ball. Wouldn't pick up the conversational gauntlet.

"Well what?"

"Well, what are we going to do?"

Fergus shrugged. She couldn't see his expression perfectly for his eyes were on the road.

"What *can* we do, Jeannie, but let things slide meanwhile?"

She drew in a deep breath. "And at the end of that meanwhile?"

"Oh, we'll let that take care of itself when the time comes."

"How? We shall have to do something about it!"

"Such as?"

"Breaking it off."

"Well, let's wait till then. We can't do it too soon, cause too much talk. But in a few months we can ... er ... get tired of each other or realize we're ... incompatible."

Jeannie swallowed. "But even in the meantime it could—could cause endless trouble."

"How?"

When she didn't answer he glanced at her. The side of his mouth quirked up.

"Steady on, Jeannie. You're about to fly into a temper. That's not good for convalescents."

"If only you would take me seriously. Then I wouldn't lose my temper. You're taking this too calmly. You're being maddening, as if it's nothing at all. As if we haven't got ourselves horribly involved. As if it couldn't cause all sorts of complications.

Fergus said dryly, "We're back to my question . . . the one I asked you before you flew off the handle. How?"

Jeannie was silent. She couldn't say, "The moment Cecily hears about this—as hear she must eventually—she'll make me give you up. She'll use threats. I may even have to tell her the way we became engaged." And she wouldn't take the risk for the children's sakes. She would keep silent as long as possible, so that the threat of having to return to their stepfather might not shadow these happy days.

Fergus said suddenly, "Oh, I get it . . . you're afraid this will affect Neville's attitude to you. Jeannie, don't pin any hopes on Neville. He isn't the marrying kind."

Colour rose in her cheeks. "You're quite wrong. He had already proposed. The night of the drama club's play."

Fergus slackened pace, ran carefully into a wider scoop of the road against the hill, stopped.

He turned to her. "What did you say?"

Her eyes were defiant. "I said Neville had already proposed."

His eyes were cold. "And your answer was?"

"My answer was no."

"Why?"

Jeannie said, "That could quite conceivably be my own business."

Fergus lifted her left hand, touched his emerald ring with one finger.

"While you wear this it's my business."

"You know perfectly well it means nothing."

"In everybody else's eyes it means everything. Why did you turn him down? Oh, I catch on . . . Jeannie, you look so unwordly, yet like all women you have the wisdom of the serpent." He laughed shortly. "You're playing hard to get. And then I've put my great big foot in it. I know what you mean about complications now. But don't worry. This will only make Neville all the more keen. He's that type. If only you had the sense to realize that he would lose interest as soon as he won you."

Jeannie's voice was cutting. "You do Neville an injustice. You think he's tarred with the same brush as Cecily. But there are *some* redeeming features about *Neville*."

As soon as the hot words were out she wished them unsaid. She knew a leap of fear in her pulses as he turned to her. She had no right to say that—to taunt him with caring for someone like Cecily . . .

Instead, inexplicably, he laughed, a laugh of real merriment!

"Oh, Jeannie, to think I once called you a little plaster saint. You certainly aren't like the song. What is it? ... 'Floating like a vapour on the soft summer air?' Oh no, this Jeannie with the light brown hair is more like one of our Central Otago winter gales . . . right off the snows ... or like the east winds, bracing and ruthless, straight off the Pacific." He kissed her lightly, still laughing, and started the engine.

So they came to Lavender Hill with nothing that mattered really settled between them, came to Elizabeth's joyous welcome, her congratulations, her pleasure in the emerald ring, in all it meant—or seemed to mean.

She even said to Jeannie in the bedroom, "I'm so glad. I've always had the sneaking fear, especially lately when her husband has been so ill, that Cecily would mess up his life once more."

Jeannie was left wondering. Did Elizabeth mean that the old attraction still bound him? That it might persist in spite of the fact that Cecily had no principles? Triumph over it too?

Jeannie looked at herself in the mirror, said to her reflection, "But, love Fergus in spite of everything. Why shouldn't he love her?" She heard the school bus stop at the gate and went down to meet the children.

Jeannie quickly recovered in the bracing air. She found Strathlachan charmingly redecorated. It would be, since Elizabeth Goldie had had a hand in it. But Elizabeth told her it was Fergus who had insisted on the thermostatically heated mattresses.

"It makes it hard to get out of bed, I know, but they're a necessity here. And much safer than electric blankets."

Jeannie said, "I imagine that in early spring when the blossom is coming out and automatic frost alarms go off it will be heavenly ... I can switch on as I get out and come back to a warm bed."

Elizabeth answered, "I don't imagine Fergus will let you do much getting up to light fire-pots. Oh, I see, you mean when you're married and the alarm will ring up here. Yes, I daresay you're the sort of wife who will leap out of bed with her husband and share all his discomforts."

Jeannie coloured brightly. She hadn't meant that. And, knowing the circumstances of their engagements, that was never in her dreams . . . sharing a room with Fergus.

Neville was still away. This was a slack time for him, and he had gone back to Auckland to his mother and sister from a conference at Lincoln Agricultural College in Canterbury.

There came the day when Jeannie was working alone in the shed. Fergus was in the orchards. There was a ring, and she answered it. Telegram for Fergus. Oh, well, probably to do with the estate. He rarely had anything personal. Apart from Lachie he seemed as scarce of relatives as the Frasers. She picked up the pencil, held it poised over the pad.

"It's from Auckland," said the operator. "Here is the text. 'Owen died this morning.' And it's signed 'Cecily'. Would you like me to repeat it?"

"No, thank you," Jeannie managed. "I've got it. I'll pass it on."

Perhaps it was the hill she climbed to where Fergus was pruning that made her so breathless. He turned.

"Oh, Fergus, there's a telegram for you. From Auckland."

She handed him the page torn off the pad.

She saw him read it, noted the control he immediately set on his emotions. He lifted his head, met her eyes.

"I'm sorry you had to take it, Jeannie. I know you thought the world of him . . . but even if he had got better there were only years of invalidism."

"Yes." Her voice was scarcely above a whisper. "And he was so energetic, so vital. It would have irked him."

Conventional words, comforting words, but none of them giving any hint of the real thoughts in their minds. Cecily was free again, a rich young widow.

Jeannie said, "Do we—I mean do you—want to wire a message of sympathy?"

Fergus's face had a closed look. "I do not. I won't play the hypocrite."

The words stabbed Jeannie. He would not pretend a sorrow he did not feel . . . Then that meant he did still care. She turned away.

"I've got a few things to do at the house, Fergus. If you don't need me any more I'll go and do them."

*If you don't need me any more.*

Among other things Jeannie decided to tackle a big box of papers that Elizabeth and Fergus had unearthed during the recent renovations. Fergus had said, "You might like to go through them. I started in case there was anything pertaining to the estate, but I soon saw they were mostly personal... letters and things, so thought I should leave them to you."

It was at the bottom of the box that she came upon the clippings. An accident case, and Fergus's name leaping up at her from it. The case of a drunken driver who had swerved madly across the road, hitting another car, whose occupants were mercifully uninjured, but his passenger, the fiancée of the driver, suffering multiple injuries. Cecily.

There were clippings of the subsequent proceedings too. The magistrate's scathing remarks, his derision when told Fergus had had only one whisky. His final remark, "Your greatest punishment will be the knowledge that you have crippled your fiancée for life."

But Cecily hadn't remained crippled. She was perfect. Another clipping explained that. A newspaper photograph of Cecily on a stretcher being loaded on to a plane en route for Auckland, thence to Great Britain to undergo special surgery. Jeannie searched madly among the conglomeration of papers for the sequel. What punishment had Fergus undergone? Some colossal fine, she supposed. She found it . . . imprisonment, three months of it. He was to be made an example, there had been too many drunken drivers on the road, drivers who took toll of innocent lives, who held death itself in their unsteady fingers, their slowed reactions.

Jeannie was remembering things . . . Fergus selling his practice, his car, becoming little more than a labourer in Aunt Jean's orchard. That would be to pay for Cecily's trip to the surgeon's, the endless operations. Had that been what had warped her nature? Did Fergus still feel an obligation to her? She realized how Fergus must have slaved—starting again from bedrock. With what hope? In the hope of marrying Cecily when she returned?

But Cecily, restored to radiant health, had married Owen Chalmers. Jeannie supposed Cecily could not face being married to someone penniless, someone who had served a gaol sentence recently. But could one blame Cecily entirely? Might she not have felt that she deserved more than a struggling existence after what Fergus's criminal negligence had done to her? Jeannie's brain whirled.

She knew that she herself would willingly have struggled with him, side by side, but you couldn't expect the Cecily's of this world to do that. Had she been ruthless, scheming, always? Or had the accident changed her personality so much that she was no longer the sweet Cecily Fergus must have loved?

Did Fergus realize that? Would he because of it always forgive her for the way she had jilted him for a richer man? Would he, finally, come when she called . . . now she was free?

Jeannie didn't know. She only knew she felt a profound pity for Fergus. His career gone, his reputation gone, all because of over-indulgence. She looked back on one of the clippings, thought of something. She had never known Fergus lie. There had been that case of the overlooked telegram that had cost them an order worth hundreds of pounds. She herself need never

have known of it. Fergus had come to her with it, apologized. Yet he had sworn in court to only one whisky.

He had said he had left the party early because his fiancée wasn't well. The prosecution had said, "You could be sheltering behind that. The probable truth is that you were so fuddled that she was ashamed, and asked you to come away." Fergus hadn't had an answer to that.

But wherever the blame lay Fergus MacGregor had made a comeback. He had paid the price and had never touched alcohol since. And evidently, since he had swept Cecily into his arms that day in Auckland, he still loved her.

Jeannie wept no tears. This went too deep for weeping. It meant that sooner or later Cecily would come back to Corriefeld.

Jeannie would have to tell her the engagement was a sham one. If he didn't, Cecily would let their stepfather know where the children were.

Jeannie had an idea that if Cecily had been threatening anything else—exposure of some secret of Jeannie's own—she would have dared her to do her worst, because she did not feel it would be to Fergus's lasting happiness to marry Cecily. But she must keep Teresa and Peter out of Bertram Skimmington's clutches.

Jeannie awoke suddenly in the small hours of the next morning, and was suddenly vividly sure of something. If Fergus had said he had only one whisky, then it was true. It couldn't be explained, but he wouldn't lie.

But sooner or later, Cecily would come, and she and Fergus would part. Fergus would probably take an accountancy practice in one of the cities. Cecily would buy it for him.

It was later, not sooner, because the next week Fergus told Jeannie that Neville was going from Auckland on a business trip to the States, connected with the lamb market, and Cecily and Mrs. Oliver were going with him. He said, a wry smile twisting his lips, "Mrs. Oliver thinks a sea trip would be the very thing to take Cecily's mind off her loss."

Jeannie said nothing.

There were times in the next few weeks when Jeannie wished Cecily would come back to Corriefeld and get it over for her ... this hideous, nerve-racking time of waiting. At others she treasured this lull in the hostilities. There were moments when she forgot, moments she would always remember.

They were winter days, bright as jewels. Jeannie had thought nothing could be more beautiful than Central Otago in autumn, but now the austere, shining beauty of winter caught her into an enchantment beyond belief. What were the palm-fringed beaches of Fiji to this?

The hoar-frosts held her spellbound. Every twig, every spider-web was outlined in pure white tracery, even the barbed-wire fences were things of ethereal beauty.

The snowfalls changed the face of the countryside, softening the rugged outlines, gentling the long-ago miners' scars, dazzling the eyes with the purity of untarnished white and bringing hordes of city dwellers, woollen-capped and trousered and scarfed, for tobogganing and skating, and farther afield to the winter playgrounds and ski-runs near Lake Wakatipu.

The children learned to skate on the dam at Pakiwaitara House, and on the Manorburn, Fergus coaching them expertly. Teresa grew tough and sturdy, achieving a deep suntan even in winter. Peter's eyes were clear with health, unclouded by sullenness. They knew nothing of the fears Jeannie kept at bay.

Fergus would not teach Jeannie to skate. "Another year," he said. "You might just set yourself back. There will still be inward healing processes going on. We'll take no risks."

Jeannie submitted without demur. It was a new experience to be taken care of.

Fergus allowed her to toboggan. Those moments seated against Fergus, his arms about her, ready to take the brunt of any spills that might come their way, were sheer ecstasy to Jeannie as they coasted down Piper's Hill, moments she would count over like beads on a rosary when came, as come it must some day, the final reckoning with Cecily, the tearing apart of their lives. Hers and Fergus's.

Several times, collecting mail from the gate, Jeannie noted American air-mails from Cecily for Fergus. Each time her lips tightened, her heart thudded against her side. She didn't know if Fergus answered them or not. She had an idea he would not mention this bogus engagement, but there was always the chance that someone might write from Corriefeld to Mrs. Oliver and mention the engagement as of local interest.



Each time Jeannie laid the letter under the others on Fergus's office in the sheds and made no comment. Neither did he.

One day, taking up Elizabeth's mail from her roadside box as she went up to Lavender Hill to sketch an urn of winter flowers Elizabeth had rung her about, Jeannie noticed among them an extremely fat letter air-mailed from Lisbon.

Without thinking, and the next moment feeling unpardonably curious, she turned it over. The sender's name and address were there in thick black positive writing. Rossiter M. Forbes.

Jeannie felt like tearing up the drive, but she mustn't appear excited. She carefully tucked it among a pile of window envelopes that indicated bills or receipts.

Elizabeth was busy at her desk working on her current floral textbook. The urn, exquisitely arranged, was on a small table against a dark wall ready for sketching.

Jeannie tumbled the letters on to Elizabeth's blotter carelessly, went across to the floral arrangement, put her head on one side, began to study it. She moved the curtains, pulled up a blind so the shadows would be more effective.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Elizabeth pick up the Lisbon letter, grow very still as she looked at it.

She turned it over, looked at the back, slowly put it back on the table, but Jeannie could sense the restrained eagerness, the desire to be alone with it.

She achieved a start, said, "Oh, Elizabeth, there's something I forgot to do ... at the sheds. I'll have to go back. Would it be all right if I came back this afternoon instead?"

Elizabeth tried to look concerned. "Yes, of course. What a pity. Like me to run you over?"

"No, no, I'll just walk. It's not terrifically urgent, but I must attend to it myself. Cheerio, see you later."

As she closed the door Elizabeth was already slitting open the envelope.

Jeannie came into the packing-room all light and glow and considerably out of breath.

Fergus said, "Jeannie! The way you ran up that hill no one would imagine that only a few weeks ago you had a serious operation. You ought not to do it!"

Jeannie waved her hands at him, poked out the tip of a pink tongue.

"Fergus, it's come! It must be what we hoped for... you never saw such a size. Just covered with stamps."

He shook her by the shoulders. "Jeannie Fraser, what in the world are you blethering about? Stop being so incoherent and give me a clue, you silly little chump."

She giggled. "Rossiter Forbes! He's written, a bulgy letter, stuck together at its bursting seams with Sellotape. There must be pages and pages and pages. From Lisbon. I excused myself, I knew she'd like to be alone with it. Actually she hardly knew I was there. Fergus, do you think she'll tell me this afternoon?"

"Tell you what, Jeannie?"

She stamped her foot. "If he's proposed!"

He pinched her chin. "Does it take pages and pages to propose? . . . why, he could have done it in a cable. Cheaply too, about four words."

"Fergus, you idiot! Can't you imagine it... in Corriefeld? It would be all over the township in two minutes," she laughed. "Oh, you're just teasing." She sighed. "It must be a wonderful proposal . . . about fourteen pages, I should say."

Fergus caught her hands. The blue eyes looked into the greenish ones.

"You didn't get a proposal, Jeannie, did you? *Not from me*. Did you feel cheated, my love?"

Jeannie caught her breath, dropped her eyes, felt the hot blood come up from her throat. *My love*. Fergus had never called her anything but Jeannie before. But he was only teasing, he was in that sort of mood. And who wanted teasing endearments?

She lifted her eyes, her look sombre. "Our engagement was only a matter of expediency, Fergus, born out of a crazy impulse on your part. Oh, I grant you it was a very nice impulse, a chivalrous one, but—"

"But ... ?" The blue eyes were very watchful.

She hesitated. "But—but it's involved us all in a somewhat awkward situation."

"You find it awkward, Jeannie, embarrassing?"

His eyes demanded the truth. "No—no, not really. I mean—I mean it has been embarrassing for you."

"Have I said so?"

"No—but it's going to be embarrassing when we break it off."

She caught in her breath, waiting for the answer to that.

"When do we break it off?"

"I—I don't know. But we mustn't wait too long. Already kindly interested folk are asking me when we plan our wedding. And Teresa has informed all the girls in her class that she will be my bridesmaid and has decided what colour she will wear. Even what *I* will wear! She even said to Elizabeth the other day, 'I expect Jeannie will ask you to receive the guests, or do you think Mrs. Gillingham ought to be asked?'"

Jeannie's tone sounded so despairing that Fergus put his head back and laughed.

"She'll have us married before we know where we are. What an organizer that child is! I can never imagine how it was she couldn't twist that stepfather of yours around her little finger."

At the mention of Mr. Skimmington Jeannie's face clouded.

Fergus said, drawing her nearer, "Jeannie, what is it? Was your life with him so bad that even the remembrance of it can cast a shadow? I mean, what does it matter now? It's all over and done with."

*But it wasn't.* Fergus thought their stepfather wasn't alive. It wouldn't be much longer till Cecily heard of the engagement. Only this American trip had postponed it as it was. That and the fact that Neville was with them. Neville had written, and Jeannie had answered very briefly, even curtly.

Jeannie thought that if she were braver she would fight this threat to the children, take advice about it. But oh, the dread of it! She could imagine the misery Peter and Teresa would suffer if they knew a court case was coming up. And there was a chance, a strong chance that the law would be on Mr. Skimmington's side.

Besides, this bogus engagement would have to be broken some time. True, it didn't seem to worry Fergus much. But there was no hint, ever, that he would like it to become reality—except when other people were about. Then he would pretend they were in love.

She could remember Elizabeth saying, "There's no need for you to wait too long, is there? ... it's only keeping two homes going. You would all be one family then. Lachie is failing, you know, Fergus. He'll not always be able to do for you."

Fergus had sounded mock-insulted. "Elizabeth, you sound so practical. . . not at all romantic." His eyes were dancing. "I'm not marrying Jeannie for her prowess as a housekeeper, nor to provide the children with an elder brother. We'll probably get married before the picking season. Best time for a honeymoon for orchardists."

He had received a reproachful but guarded look from Jeannie.

But they had never actually discussed a date for breaking it off. Jeannie had a theory of her own about that. She didn't doubt that the attraction for Cecily still held, so probably Fergus thought it might give rise to really unkind talk if he broke off his engagement to Jeannie as soon as Cecily, his former fiancée, was free again.

So, for the time being, Jeannie let things slide. There would be time to break it off and tidy up her life when she heard Cecily was coming home. She would fix it up without delay then.

Meanwhile she savoured every moment to the brim.

She went across to Elizabeth's that afternoon, but she was not at home. They had an arrangement that if Elizabeth wanted anything sketched and was out, Jeannie just went ahead. The house was never locked. Few houses in Corriefeld ever were.

Jeannie had got no farther than the first few strokes when she heard Elizabeth's car pull up at the loggia. As she came in Jeannie turned. This was an Elizabeth Jeannie had never seen. The schooled, patient lines about her mouth were gone. Elizabeth had a beautiful mouth, small, full-lipped, a passionate mouth. And now her eyes looked as if someone had lit candles behind them. Her step was like a young girl's.

Jeannie made no comment. Elizabeth would be unaware of the change in herself. But she could not concentrate on work. She answered all Jeannie's questions and comments with an absent-mindedness that was almost laughable.

Jeannie told Fergus that he could be quite sure Rossiter Forbes had proposed. In the fortnight that followed Jeannie had to restrain herself from leading the conversation towards confidences. She so longed to know that it was a constant temptation.

Fergus laughed at her. "You're too impatient. Both Rossiter and Elizabeth have had a long schooling in the art of waiting. They won't rush their fences. I expect Rossiter will be home in a couple of months and they'll decide things then. He may *not* have said anything definite in his letter, you know. Some chaps aren't eloquent with their pens."

"No, some aren't... but a letter that size wasn't exactly inarticulate."

"Probably just a travel account, my love."

"It wasn't. . . I'm sure it wasn't." Jeannie was so passionate in her denial that she missed the endearment. "No travel account could have brought that look to Elizabeth's eyes ... or the sort of aura she has worn since."

"What do you mean, aura? Define aura to me."

Jeannie said seriously, "I don't need to. You've seen it yourself ... a sort of quiet, singing happiness."

"Yes, I know. I'm only teasing. You bite so, Jeannie. Elizabeth can't conceal it. I think you're right. Even if it's only wishful thinking t o o ... a love of romance, of happy endings."

Jeannie looked up. "Are you sneering at happy endings, Fergus? Don't you believe in them at all?"

He was opposite her in one of the big chintz-covered chairs.

"I wasn't sneering. Might I remind you that I had a finger in this pie—that I did my best to bring about this particular happy ending?"

"That doesn't answer me—I asked do you believe in them?"

"I didn't once. I do now."

Something in his voice, his look, an intensity of longing, made Jeannie drop her gaze. She looked down mistily at the sewing on her lap. Of course,

he could hope for a happy ending now. Cecily was free. She had an idea, now that she had come to know

Fergus well, that he would never have connived at a divorce. But since Cecily was now widowed they could marry. What was there in some women that drew men, made them love them in spite of their inner crookedness, their lack of integrity? It was something other women just couldn't understand. Except the women who married rotters and loved them in spite of all.

She forced her voice to remain steady, kept on unpicking Peter's shirt collar to turn it. "We won't carry this bogus engagement on much longer, Fergus. We must tidy things up soon."

He was filling his pipe, ramming the tobacco into the bowl. His eyes met hers over the flame of the match as he lit it.

"No hurry. Let's wait till the Olivers get back."

Till *Cecily* gets back, said Jeannie's heart.

SHE was across at Elizabeth's again, sketching. And as before Elizabeth was out. Things were slack at the orchards and Jeannie spent much time here. Sometimes she felt as if she warmed her cold hands at the warmth of Elizabeth's inner happiness.

She was in the little room that was Elizabeth's own. It opened off the drawing-room with glass doors and there were french windows on to the loggia from that room. Elizabeth might be working in the garden somewhere, but Jeannie hadn't been able to find her. She had the sprays of winter-sweet and jessamine arranged, so Jeannie settled in.

After half an hour or so she heard Elizabeth's step on the gravel drive. She went to the doors into the drawing-room, stood there, looking towards the loggia. Elizabeth was coming up the steps. She had new tweeds on, soft blue checks. The sun shone on her hair, lighting up the burnished gleams in it.

She paused on the step into the room, put her head on one side as if listening. Jeannie checked her greeting, listened too. A car on the gravel. It shot into view suddenly, pulling up with a shriek of brakes.

Elizabeth stood as if turned to stone, a hand to her breast, one foot on the step.

Out of the car leapt a tall, chestnut-haired man, with a lean face. He was broad-shouldered, vital, in a hurry. It somehow didn't need Elizabeth's incredulous cry of "Rossiter . . . Ross!" or her hands going out to him to inform Jeannie of his name. Elizabeth moved with a fluid grace that seemed like lightning. The two figures met in the centre of the tiled loggia.

Rossiter Forbes said, "Elizabeth . . . Elizabeth, I'd have gone stark raving mad if you'd been out." The two figures seemed to merge into each other.

Jeannie suddenly realized she was an unwanted, unsuspected third. She backed hastily into Elizabeth's study again, pulling the glass doors to very gently. Whatever should she do? Good heavens, they were coming into the drawing-room. Jeannie backed towards the french windows of the study on silent feet, holding her breath.

They would never forgive her. She could hear them. Neither of them were keeping their voices down.

Elizabeth was saying: "But, Rossiter, I— I didn't even expect your reply yet. How. . . when . . . ?"

He was laughing. "Darling, how could I wait? I was terribly het up after I wrote to you. I kept telling myself of course you cared, you must care but I had so little to go on. I felt, after Jessie died, I must go away, sort myself out. Put some time, distance between that part of my existence and the next. I couldn't stay near you, and not tell you, and I knew it was too soon.

"I dared not let myself go in letters even, right away. Though I did write several times when it was too much for me. Once in Canada, once in Rome. I tore them up. I would dash out and buy a postcard instead. A postcard! Then Fergus MacGregor wrote and said he thought you were planning a trip abroad, that you might be gone when I got back. I nearly went mad."

Elizabeth said incredulously, "Fergus said . . . what? Oh, he couldn't have meant abroad. I did say once I might go up to Alan's in Wanganui, but there was nothing definite about even that. I—I did think that if—if you came back and—and nothing happened, I just couldn't bear to be here. Oh, you've muddled up what Fergus meant. But thank heaven you did. But, darling . . . you've cut your trip short. You shouldn't have. You could have just replied and we could have planned things for your return."

Rossiter laughed again. "Elizabeth! If only you'd known how I've felt. All those wonderful places, and thinking all the time, if only Elizabeth were here . . . There's never been a sunset, a cathedral, a mountain that I haven't ached to share with you. Besides, I'm finishing the trip, only not alone. These days of air travel we can be back in Lisbon in no time. I've booked our seats, made preliminary arrangements for your tax clearances and vaccinations . . . and I've got a special licence for the day after tomorrow. No, I'm not waiting, Elizabeth. Can you be ready? Doesn't matter if you are ready or not. We'll buy you a trousseau overseas... a fabulous one. . . We won't waste a moment. We—"

All this time Jeannie, though longing to hear it all, had been edging quietly towards the windows. She prayed they would open with no betraying



squeak, no click. She cast an anxious glance towards the glass doors into the drawing-room. They could push it open so quickly and be upon her. If only she could get out on to the loggia, quietly re-latching the door, they would never know. What a blessing her brogues had rubber soles.

She made it while the voices went on ... only indistinguishable murmurs now, punctuated by silences that could mean only one thing . . . Elizabeth was being kissed. Jeannie found herself safely out on the loggia, and, clutching her pad against herself, dropped silently on to a flowerbed and ran into the shrubbery.

She had to force her way through the larch plantation, had to crawl under a hedge; she got scratched, laddered a nylon, but none of it mattered.

Her explanations to Fergus, as incoherent as the first ones, were met this time with sheer satisfaction.

"Well, you certainly had a box seat, Jeannie. You don't think they suspected you were there?"

"No. I'd had nothing with me but my sketchbook and pencil, so there are no clues. They must never know."

"Wedding the day after tomorrow, eh? These sheep-farmers don't let the grass grow under their feet once they get going. They should jolly well ask me to be best man. I only hope they don't hold a post-mortem on my letter. I shall have to concoct something. Help me out, Jeannie, in case Elizabeth tackles me."

"I think Elizabeth will be in too much of a daze, coupled with a mad whirl of packing, to analyse anything." Jeannie sighed. "I'm so happy for her, but for myself... "

"For yourself. .. ?"

"I'll miss her horribly. I've loved Elizabeth. I've always felt that if ever I needed a friend to confide in, she was there."

"But you don't confide in anyone, do you, Jeannie? You're distressingly independent. You fight your own battles."

She said, "I've always had to, Fergus. Daddy died, and Mother . . . but I'd better not say anything about Mother. It only reminds you of the way she treated Lachie's brother."

She looked lost, distressed, defenceless.

Fergus said gently, "I've come a long way since that night I was so harsh to you about your mother, Jeannie. I think we've both come a long way. Sometimes circumstances are against us. Perhaps they were against Fay Leslie too. Perhaps my Uncle Ian should have had more strength of character. There would be a story behind it. Perhaps she was no more than foolish, thoughtless . . . and you loved her in spite of it. She made your father happy, didn't she? Perhaps she loved him with an overwhelming love . . . perhaps she felt that if she married Ian loving your father, she would be living a lie. The people we love are not always perfect, are they? And we love them in spite of their faults. Because of them, sometimes."

Jeannie's heart said, Cecily ... that's the way he loves her. Faults and all.

Suddenly Jeannie hid her face against Fergus. She felt unable to look up, to continue to meet his gaze without revealing her love for him. His hand came up to her hair in a protective, elder-brotherly way. He felt her trembling, then fumbling.

He laughed, "Women can never find their handkerchiefs in moments of overcharged feelings, can they? Here, take mine."

Jeannie mopped up. Then Fergus said a strange thing. "Well, Elizabeth won't be here to confide in, but I will be."

She said, uncertainly, "What would I want to confide?"

He answered gravely, "That's just what I don't know. But it's something to do with leaving Auckland, isn't it? I wish you could find it in your heart to trust me, Jeannie."

She remained as she was, her ruffled head against his chest, longing to tell him. But how could she? She dared not tell him that his Cecily had threatened her. Men took such odd views of things, were chained to the letter of the law. He would insist on the whole thing being brought into the open.

There had been a strange case in the papers recently. A father had actually been charged with the abduction of his own children. If that could happen, what chance had a sister?

No, she would stave off the evil day as long as possible—alone. In any case, with Peter studying hard now for O-levels in mid-November, she would not risk worrying him. Once he had that qualification behind him, even if his

stepfather did get custody of him for a while, he could, in later years, go on from there.

Jeannie said, "Sorry, Fergus, but I'm like Kipling's cat, I walk by myself and I wave my long tail where I please. I fight my own battles, as I'm always telling you."

He touched the emerald fleetingly. "Even though you wear my ring and I'm prepared to fight them for you."

She would not answer.

He continued, "You needn't be afraid to tell me, you know. We all have things in our lives we aren't exactly proud of. Me, for instance. I've been meaning to tell you for some time. I did three months in prison."

He held himself very erect, awaiting her reaction.

She said calmly, "Yes, I know."

"You know?"

"I found some clippings among Aunt Jean's papers when I came home."

"I wonder you didn't hand my ring back there and then."

She was indignant. "As if I would! As if that could make any difference. Besides . . . it must have been a miscarriage of justice. You said you had only had one whisky. And I've never known you tell a lie, Fergus. You even own up before you're found out. So you *did* just have the one whisky."

There was a strange look on his face, a blend of delighted incredulity and eagerness. But why . . . ?

"It was the truth," he said simply, and without heroics. "But other things were against me. I'm not making myself out a martyr... I don't feel it was a miscarriage of justice. It was crazy, reckless driving, and the price had to be paid. I have a great respect for law and order. It just happened that..." He stopped while Jeannie waited, tensed, to know what it was.

She tightened her grip on his hands. Their roles were reversed. Now she was the comforter, she his champion. It was a glorious feeling. "What happened, Fergus? Tell me."

Fergus released his hands. "When you confide in me, I'll confide in you." The phone rang. Elizabeth.

Her voice was shaken, tremulous, young. "Fergus, I—Rossiter is here... he flew in to Taieri last night. I—he—he wants to ask you something."

Rossiter was more coherent. He'd had longer to plan exactly what they were going to do. Fergus agreed to be best man at a wedding the day after tomorrow. He managed to sound surprised, congratulatory, warmly interested.

Elizabeth spoke to Jeannie. "We'd like you to be the other witness. Isn't it wonderful? No fuss, no bother. Just a wedding at St. Enoch's. We aren't letting anyone else know. Good job it's in Mulberry Lane. I hope if I'm seen they'll think I'm just decorating the church for Sunday. We'll have a quiet luncheon at Lavender Hill. Just you and Fergus, the minister and his wife."

By the time Jeannie put the phone down the atmosphere between Fergus and herself seemed ordinary, prosaic.

Suddenly the new season was upon them. The buds began to swell upon the trees, the snows on the mountains to thaw, the winds blew less keenly. There were not so many hazards on the roads though the ice warnings were still attended to, screenings still put on the more slippery grades, motorists still carried chains.

The daffodil spears were dotted all over the garden, crocus buds were showing lavender and gold at their tips.

The wax-eyes still came for their ration of honey and water at Jeannie's bird-tables, because as yet the *kowhais* were not out on the hillsides to satisfy the nectar-loving birds. The *tuis* and bell-birds came too, paying toll in sweet song.

The fire-pots were all ready, the oil drums replenished against the time when blossom and half-formed fruit might be assailed by frost.

Jeannie felt lost without Elizabeth. Lavender Hill had a shut-up, reserved air about it. Jeannie had the key and aired it occasionally.

"We will be back in three months," she had said, "then I'll see to getting my traps over to Rossiter's place."

Jeannie had said, with a loving look about the gracious house sweet with early flowers for Elizabeth's wedding, "It will be a terrible wrench, I suppose."

Elizabeth had laughed. "Oh no. It was never more than a compensation prize. Rossiter's place is a farmstead. With a background of green hills and

rocky outcrops. I shall do over the garden and help him outside. I ask nothing more of life, not even Lavender Hill. Ross asked me if I would like him to sell up and to retire here. It was the measure of his love for me. Pukerangi has been in the Forbes family for four generations. It was taken up in pioneer days. It means The Hill of Heaven. That's what it will mean to me, to us."

Sometimes Jeannie felt as if she had lived at Strathlachan for ever. It was part and parcel of her ... the hills, the trees, the symmetrical orchards, the seasonal activity, the homely old homestead, the children's happiness, Lachie ... Fergus.

She had become a very real part of the township's social life.

Mrs. Robertson said to her one day, "You're so like your godmother. I almost think she was your real aunt. Mrs. Kelvington had a fine community spirit, and a sunshiny nature."

Jeannie laughed. "I'd like to think I was like her." She hoped these kindly country folk would be as warm to her when eventually, as some day she must, she broke off her engagement to Fergus. They would have to say it was by mutual agreement. They mustn't invent any reason that might cause controversy, reflect on either of them, result in partisanship.

There was the Spring Ball, to be held in the completed at last Memorial Hall.

"Goodness knows why we hold it then," said Fergus. "It's rather a tricky time ... the frost alarms are getting frequent. But somehow it seems so fitting to hold it then to celebrate the blossoming. A sort of thanksgiving. You must get a new frock."

It sounded so blessedly ordinary. Just the thing a man would say to his fiancée. Sometimes Jeannie was able to forget Cecily for hours at a time.

It was just after the first dance of the Spring Ball that Jeannie heard that the Olivers were on their way home.

Mrs. Robertson said it so casually. Jeannie felt her heart halt, then race. This was the end, then. She would have tonight. She would have to act quickly after then. This evening, with its blossom-decorated hall, its air of burgeoning, its friendliness, was the last. An evening to remember.

She and Fergus waltzing together, to everyone else the picture of a pleasant young couple, well liked in the district, hardworking both of them, each with certain family responsibilities, an old uncle finding refuge in the evening of his life, a young brother and sister under the care of their older sister . . . Fergus ruddily handsome with his craggy features and rather lined mouth . . . that Jeannie knew now was the result of that three months' imprisonment. Jeannie with her brown skin and greenish eyes, in an apricot frock that brought up her warm tonings and complimented the bronze glints in her brown hair. . .

It was all delightfully informal, and in the big supper-room the tables, buffet-fashion, were laden with all sorts of savouries and country fare.

Jeannie, watching Fergus manoeuvre a limp roll of ham and asparagus with admirable dexterity, was laughing and flushed. She was ignoring the unease that would take over when she was alone in her room that night.

There was a little stir at the door. Latecomers. Everyone in their group looked over. Cecily and Neville. Cecily in a sinuous green frock with baleful-looking yellow brilliants embroidering it, a frock that was definitely out of place in a country hall, Neville tall, debonair, beside her. His eyes sought for Jeannie, found her. He came across, his sister with him.

Jeannie found her mouth was dry. She was aware that Fergus, beside her, had stiffened. She raised her glass of lime-and- soda to her lips. The light caught the emerald ring.

Cecily nodded briefly to the others, met Jeannie's eyes, dropped hers to Jeannie's hand, trembling as it held the glass . . .

Cecily said smoothly, "See, Neville?" She lifted Jeannie's hand. "It seems as if things have been happening since we went away. Who, may we enquire, is the lucky man?"

Jeannie heard Fergus's voice, cool, with an odd inflection in it. Given other circumstances she would have taken it for pride.

"The fortunate man is, of course, myself. How are you, Cecily? When did you leave the States?"

Jeannie hardly knew what she said after that. She had a vague idea that Cecily covered up her feelings fairly well. That somehow Fergus manoeuvred Jeannie from the Olivers, or else the Olivers were drawn into another set.

His reaction puzzled her. He hardly left her side the rest of the evening. He did not dance with Cecily. He danced the remaining two with Jeannie. Cecily did try to get him to herself, but he foiled her. He also foiled Neville's attempt to get Jeannie away. He said to her, "Now get your wrap. I've an idea this is going to be a heavier frost than any so far. Better exchange your glad rags for sooty slacks as soon as possible, Cinderella, you're going to need them."

They were in the car on the way home before Jeannie had much time to think. It *was* a busy night, just as Fergus had predicted.

They had scarcely got into the house when the frost alarm went off. Jeannie insisted on helping Fergus.

"Lachie hasn't heard it... I peeped in— he's forty fathoms deep. I'll not sleep anyway if I think you're out there lighting up the pots."

Fergus had given in for once. They worked away in direct contrast to the earliest part of the evening when all had been glamour and soft music. There was certainly no romance about this ... the pungent sickly smell of the burning oil, the soot, the smoke. There were lights on the hillside as the men worked quickly, efficiently. No owl hooting tonight, no murmur of wind among the trees, the distant shirring of the river waters over the shallows ... just sundry bumps and bangs, dogs, disturbed from their slumbers, barking in protest.

Then smoke stealing out amongst the blossom-laden trees, lessening the deadly, destroying cold.

There were frost diamonds on the hard ground, on the tree branches, on the delicately opening blooms. At last it was finished. They retreated to the homestead, turned to look. The fire-pots looked like sacrificial fires lit to propitiate the Great God Frost. In the morning it would be a shambles. Jeannie had rushed round closing all the windows, but there would be smuts everywhere ... ledges, furniture, curtains ... all the outbuildings. And the glory of the blossoms would be overlaid with soot. But the fruit would be saved.

As they came into the lighted kitchen they looked at each other, laughed. They were like golliwogs, with the whites of their eyes showing through it all.

"Who'd be an orchardist?" demanded Fergus.

She said, "You might as well turn in here. Go and have a shower while I put on a cup of tea. Then I'll shower and we'll try to get an hour or two of sleep." She grimaced. "A few hours ago the setting was so romantic . . . and now—"

Suddenly Fergus caught hold of her, soot and all. "I don't know if this isn't just as romantic, Jeannie. And there's more reality to it."

He kissed her in a way he hadn't done since that night on Piper's Hill, laughed and went off to the shower.

Left alone, Jeannie put her hands to her sooty face, thought she mustn't let tears trickle through. It would make her look more ludicrous than ever. Her thoughts were chaotic. She knew she couldn't think things out at this time of night, weary to the point of exhaustion, but there was so much that puzzled her. Fergus's reaction to Cecily's sudden appearance, for instance.

Had Fergus never quite forgiven Cecily for marrying Owen? Was this his way of paying her out? Pretending their engagement was all an engagement should be? She didn't know. And it didn't matter, because as soon as she could she was going to throw her hand in. She would have to.

When finally Jeannie got to bed she fell into a deep uneasy sleep where nightmares pursued her. She would wake, trembling, and too hot, try to stay awake, drop again into that strange region of subconscious fears and ridiculous happenings where Bertram peered at her through the smutty windows of Strathlachan . . . She was rushing from one room to another, locking them, pulling down the blinds. But he was always there, fumbling at the catches, trying the doors. He was laughing at Peter, jeering . . . "Thought you'd get your O-levels, didn't you? . . . but it's two months away and you're coming to the pickle factory . . . see!"

She woke, struggling to protest, to find Fergus bending over her, a breakfast tray in his hands.

He was laughing. "Jeannie, what are you up to in your sleep? You sound as if you were struggling single-handed against all the frost demons in Central Otago. And look at your bed, you restless child."

It almost brought tears to Jeannie's eyes. She had had no petting for years. She had always been the one to lean upon.



"Oh, I must get up. The children have got to get the bus."

"They've gone . . . half an hour ago. Uncle Lachie is still in the house, to protect your good name, so don't fuss. Time someone took care of you. You drive yourself too hard. I don't intend to allow it from now on. Now, sit up." He picked up a couple of cushions from the window-seat, tucked them neatly behind her back.

"You look as if you've been dragged through a gorse-bush backwards," he told her unromantically, handing her a brush, comb and mirror. "I've switched your bed on to high. It's some frost. You can turn it down if it gets too hot. There you are, madam." He surveyed the tray proudly. "Couldn't find any tray cloths. That's a pillow-case." There was oatmeal porridge, cream, toast, marmalade, tea.

Jeannie ought to have enjoyed it immensely, the luxury of breakfast in bed, but it might just as well have been chaff or sawdust for all the flavour it had. Today was the day of reckoning. She would have to go down to Oliver's to see Cecily as soon as possible. She would tell Fergus she had messages to do. She would tell Cecily the true circumstances of their engagement, promise her it would be broken off quite soon ... if Cecily would promise not to tell her stepfather where they were.

Perhaps it was a craven thing to do ... but then in any case it wasn't as if Fergus loved her.

She heard Fergus coming. He took her tray, said, "I'll just rinse these things out. Lachie has done the breakfast things we used. Will you have an hour in bed? You look really washed out."

Washed out! Not interestingly pale, not wan and languid ... a hag, no doubt.

Her reflection did nothing to reassure her. She had no colour at all, and Jeannie depended on colour for looks.

She hoped Cecily would be up. Jeannie didn't want to be called by her. She was going down herself to surrender.

Jeannie got out the car, stopped at the packing-shed. She didn't particularly want to see Fergus again before doing this, but if a phone call came for her he would look for her all over the property.

She had dressed herself very carefully in her green tweeds.

She was driving her own car, quite proficient after Fergus's patient lessons.

She put her head round the shed door. "I've some messages to get, Fergus. I'll be back in about an hour."

He was at the phone. He said, "Just a moment," covered the receiver with his hand, said, "What did you say, Jeannie?" and nodded as she repeated it. He said, returning to the phone, "Oh, good. He'll be back on the late plane today, Mollie? Thank you. Then he'll be phoning me this evening."

He must have been ringing the Gillinghams' in Dunedin. Arthur must have been away. She wondered where. Not that it mattered. Nothing mattered. Wasn't it odd, when your world was falling to bits about you, you went on wondering about perfectly ordinary, even insignificant things! Like wondering where Mr. Gillingham had been. As if it mattered!

She drove the car through the township and beyond it to Mallow Glen.

Mrs. Oliver employed a girl in the mornings. She answered the door, and took Jeannie into a sunny morning-room. There was a fire burning and it had wide-paned windows on two sides, but Jeannie's hands were ice-cold.

Cecily came in. Jeannie went straight to the point.

"You found out why I left Auckland so secretly?"

"Yes. It wasn't hard. I thought I was wise to find out. I suspected, with good cause it seems, that I might need that knowledge. Weren't you extremely foolish? That's abduction . . . taking children away from their legal guardian."

"Perhaps I was foolish. But at the time I was desperate to get the children away from their unhappy atmosphere."

"You must have been—to risk putting yourself on the wrong side of the law."

It was rather odd. Cecily's manner was cold, vindictive, but not threatening, not purposeful. Yet it was only last night that she had seen Fergus's ring on Jeannie's finger.

But perhaps it was just that Cecily knew she held all the cards now, so she was taking it calmly. She knew she had only to threaten to tell Bertram Skimmington where they were to make Jeannie break off her engagement.

Jeannie plunged. "Mrs. Chalmers, our engagement isn't what it seems. Let me explain. At first Fergus and I simply detested each other, because ..." She hesitated. She didn't want to antagonize Cecily too much.

Cecily's foot tapped impatiently. "Go on. You mean because of your first meeting." Her eyes were watchful, even anxious. "You wouldn't trust him."

Jeannie swallowed. "No. But later I came to. ..

"You came to what?"

"I—I felt he was a fine manager, that I must not sit in judgement. Then I was ill and he and Elizabeth rushed me to hospital by plane. It was touch and go. Fergus ... as you will know so well ... is sympathetic and chivalrous."

Cecily's eyes held something Jeannie could not analyse. Could it be fear? Uneasiness, anyway.

Her voice was sharp. "Exactly what do you mean? *I* know he's chivalrous?" She took hold of Jeannie's arm. "What *has* Fergus been telling you?"

Jeannie was bewildered. "He hasn't been telling me anything. I know you were once engaged. .. you're bound to know what he's like. He was sorry for me—all alone with no adult relations. He thought someone ought to stay at the hospital and thought he wouldn't be allowed otherwise. So he said he was my fiance. I thought it would get no farther than the hospital. But a reporter came in to write up the air rescue and—"

Cecily's eyes were hard. "And you saw that as a way to commit Fergus irrevocably to an engagement that doesn't mean a thing."

"No." Jeannie's tone carried conviction. "The nurse gave it away. I rang Fergus long distance and told him to block it. He forgot."

"He *forgot!*" Cecily's eyes narrowed.

"So we thought we couldn't do anything right away. I went to the Gillinghams' for the weekend when we came out. You may know Mollie Gillingham. You can't hold her back. She was horrified at my not having a ring. Fergus told her some lame story about us just getting engaged the day I was taken ill . . . She got a jeweller friend to come up that very evening with some rings. So we decided to let it ride till, without fuss or bother, we can break it off . . . by mutual consent."

Cecily let out a deep breath. "You've agreed to do that. You both want to do it?"

"Yes, so if you have any idea of threatening to tell my stepfather that we're here, you need not. The engagement is a farce and will soon be ended."

"Tell your stepfather? Then. .. but—" A mixture of emotions was chasing over the hard, lovely face in front of Jeannie. Jeannie wondered at it.

A calculating gleam shot into the topaz eyes, then it was overlaid by a look of cunning.

Cecily said, "Tell me one thing. Tell me the truth. If I hadn't found this out, and Fergus had asked you to—well, make this engagement a real one, would you have consented?"

Jeannie looked at her. "Must you turn the sword?" she asked.

"So you do love him?"

Jeannie said, "But that doesn't constitute a danger ... to you. He certainly doesn't love me. He's merely being kind."

"But had I not come back free, you might have married him?"

Jeannie brought out the unpalatable truth. "He hasn't asked me."

Cecily said crisply, "Then end this ridiculous situation as quickly as you can, or Bertram Skimmington's lawyers will hear from me. And ..." her eyes were intent on Jeannie's "... if Fergus gets as much as a hint that I've brought pressure to bear upon you to make you release him, I'll send that wire to Auckland just the same."

Jeannie was beaten. She turned to go.

Cecily said, "Just a moment, Miss Fraser. Fergus is no fool. He mustn't know this has anything to do with me. If it's broken off as soon as I arrive he may suspect. I give you a week. No longer. And you must be clever how you do it."

THAT week was a torture to Jeannie. Neville pretended to be heart-broken that she had got herself engaged, but Jeannie suspected that it was only chagrin, that he was secretly relieved. Neville didn't want to marry, only to amuse himself. He would always be fickle, quite charming, with here and there a gleam of decency— candid, self-seeking, not good husband material.

He called around one morning, said, "I have to make a call at a homestead away up near Lake Wanaka. Care to come? I'm sure Fergus would trust you to me." This was in front of Fergus. He added, "She's been here all this time and has never seen the lake."

Jeannie seized at the opportunity to get away from Strathlachan, from Fergus. The promise Cecily had made her, to do nothing about the situation in Auckland, hadn't relieved her mind as much as she had hoped. Cecily was so unpredictable, so unscrupulous. And every moment she spent in Fergus's company was a temptation to tell him everything.

She enjoyed, in a detached way, the drive with Neville. The lady of the house was quite charming to her, but it was farther than Jeannie had anticipated, and the road over the Crown Range high and perilous and had to be negotiated with care. She knew Lachie would go up to sleep at the house, but she didn't like being as late as this. She hoped Fergus wouldn't be up there too, sitting up for her. She dreaded being alone with him.

She needn't have worried, she told herself cynically later. As Neville turned in the drive gates of Strathlachan he had to pull up for another car leaving. *Cecily's car*. It had come from the direction of the manager's house.

Neville shot her a quick look. "What's my darling little sister up to now?"

Jeannie's tone was carefully controlled. "They're old friends, Neville. I suppose she called and the time just slipped away."

"Oh, not to say friends," said Neville. "Family loyalty aside, I wouldn't trust my sister an inch when it comes to Fergus. And although you turned me down, you little wretch, I have an odd tenderness for you."

Jeannie felt a sudden rush of tears and made no answer.

She had a ring from Cecily early the next morning. "You can go ahead and break it off any time you like now, Miss Fraser. I've prepared the way for you. I saw Fergus last night."

Jeannie swallowed. She mustn't let her voice break.

"You mean—you mean Fergus and you have reached—an understanding?"

There was a short silence, then: "Yes. He will accept your decision to break it off without question. I'd not make too much of it if I were you. Just tell Fergus, as agreed, that this farce must end. And, Miss Fraser, don't tell him you've heard from me. Or make a fuss. Or sound regretful. Fergus is quite ready to be released, believe me. Make it short and snappy. You will? Good. Goodbye."

Jeannie stood and stared at the wall above the phone, bitterness in her heart, resentment and a wild fierce pain breaking over her.

Fergus is *ready* to be released. One overture from Cecily and he was hers. Oh, Fergus, Fergus! All she will do to your fine spirit.

When she went to Fergus she couldn't speak to him because he had someone with him.

Lachie said, "It's a fellow from Roxburgh, looking over Fergus's car with a view to purchasing it, lassie."

Jeannie stared. "Is—is Fergus selling it... getting another?"

"Selling it, aye, but there's no other in the offing that I ken."

"But why?"

"Och, ask yourself, Lassie. What will you and he be wanting with two cars? And he wants the money."

Jeannie said to herself, not he and I . . . but he and Cecily. Cecily had brought back a new Chevrolet from the States.

She felt curiously reluctant to appear as if she knew what Fergus was doing, but he introduced the subject himself as she went to him when the man had left.

"I've sold my car. Got a good price for it."

Jeannie felt something was expected, so she said, "What for?"

Fergus said, looking sideways at her, "I might as well break it to you this way as any. I intend getting married. Quite soon. I had the chance of putting a deposit down on Lavender Hill. I took it." His mouth twisted wryly. "Even

if a chap marries a wife with money he likes to think he can offer her a house of his own."

Jeannie stood very still. Fergus didn't know she had heard from Cecily. He must have been afraid she was not going to stick to their bargain and break the engagement. So he was doing it.

She raised her eyes to his.

"Well," said Fergus, "am I a fool? Can one disregard the past... forget it?"

Jeannie wanted to cry, "Yes, you are a fool. You're mad ... to place your heart in Cecily's cruel keeping—again." She dared not. Pity for them both twisted in her heart. For herself and for Fergus. He would buy Lavender Hill. Yes ... she supposed Cecily had made it plain that she would not live in the tiny utility manager's house. But Fergus ... he deserved better than this.

She realized that Fergus was looking at her expectantly. He wanted her to accept the breaking-off graciously. They had so often cold-bloodedly discussed the time when they would. So Fergus was telling her plainly.

She said unsteadily, "I've—I've been trying to tell you for a few days ... We've got to end this farce of an engagement. We'll let it be known we've both decided it wouldn't work out, that we're not suited. We'll save a lot of talk that way."

She knew her sentences were staccato, insincere, but Cecily had told her Fergus was ready for this ...

She slipped her ring off, looked at it oddly for a moment—a farewell moment—held it out to him. "That's all, Fergus. Leave it at that, won't you? It has served its turn."

She left him abruptly, walked out into the magic world of sunshine and blossom with no eyes for any of it. On her finger she could still feel the circle of the ring.

She had a feeling that he stood watching her all the way back to the house, but she would not turn. She hoped that her abrupt acceptance of what he had just told her would not reveal to him that her feelings were so involved ... but she had not been able to bring herself to congratulate him.

Of the future Jeannie dared not think. To see Fergus married to Cecily... to have him still working on the estate. Or would he? His proud gesture of buying Lavender Hill as a fitting setting for a lovely bride was probably a

pitiful one. Cecily was a city girl. She would never be content to be the wife of an orchard manager. She had all Owen Chalmers' money now. She would buy Fergus an accountancy practice in one of the cities, begin social climbing.

Perhaps it would be best. Jeannie would have a chance of rebuilding her life then—a life without Fergus, and with Elizabeth far away. But it had to be.

She was possessed by a merciful numbness all day and thankful beyond measure that Fergus did not come near her. In any case he seemed to spend most of the afternoon out. He was dressed as if for Dunedin, but he wouldn't go so far at this time. Probably he would be going to Oliver's to tell Cecily about the house. Perhaps when Cecily came to his house last night, Fergus himself, overcome by emotions long in check, had told her the truth about their engagement. And Cecily, glad at the turn of events, would keep quiet about the part she had played. Yet Cecily must have hinted in some way that Jeannie was ready to break it off.

Jeannie performed all her duties mechanically, did the ironing, cooked the dinner, forced herself not to listen for Fergus's footsteps, helped Peter with his homework.

When Fergus did not come near her next morning Jeannie knew he was avoiding her. Perhaps she had somehow given away something of what it had cost her to give Fergus back his ring. Either it had embarrassed him or, kindly as always, he was giving her time to get over it.

Jeannie stayed in, cleaning the house fiercely, determined to let no tears fall. This was the price she had to pay for Teresa and Peter's happiness.

It was three when the phone rang. It rang stridently in the warm kitchen with the ring that always came from the other house. But this sounded impatient.

Fergus.

Jeannie took hold of her emotions. She needn't have bothered. He wasn't wondering about her reactions, he was issuing orders.

"Jeannie, I want you to get ready to be taken out. I've got Mr. and Mrs. Gillingham here. They had a late lunch with me. It's business. Can you be



ready in ten minutes? Sorry I can't give you longer. We have an appointment." He hung up.

Jeannie dressed quickly but carefully in a new bamboo green woollen frock she had bought recently, an angora fibre. There was a loose coat to go with it, a pull-on hat of the same material. She fastened a triple string of pearls over the softly draped neckline, she had palest green shoes to match, handbag, gloves.

She heard the car arrive, the Gillinghams' sleek black city car covered with the golden dust of the Central Otago roads.

Fergus got out, met her in the back porch. He had a hand in his pocket. He drew it out.

It held the ring.

"You're to wear this," he said.

He picked up her hand. Jeannie could have run from him. This was sheer torture, but she understood. Mollie was so quick, so ready and rash in her speech, and this was a business trip. Fergus didn't want it cluttered up with personal explanations. And he must be aware that the Gillinghams did not like Cecily, but loved Jeannie.

She said, through stiff lips, "I understand, Fergus. You don't want Mollie to know—yet."

He put a hand under her elbow. She was into the car in the back beside Mollie before she knew where she was. Arthur Gillingham occupied the seat beside Fergus, who was driving. The car swept down the drive.

Jeannie forced herself to small talk, but Mollie didn't seem as voluble as usual or as easy in her manner, and finally Jeannie lapsed into silence.

She roused herself as they left the township behind to say, "Where are we going, Fergus? This is most mysterious."

"It isn't meant to be," he said. "We're going to Olivers'."

Dismay, utter and complete, descended upon Jeannie. She said nothing more. She allowed Fergus to help her from the car, take her up the short path flanked by grape hyacinths and crocuses, Mr. and Mrs. Gillingham following.

Fergus didn't ring. The door was ajar. He pushed it open, led the way into the morning-room. Cecily was there, standing on the hearthrug, her eyes cool, but an air of control about her that Jeannie, though so concerned with

her own emotions, did not miss. She gave the impression, too, of being on the defensive.

Fergus said, "Good afternoon, Cecily. You know the others, of course."

Cecily said, "This is almost a delegation. It makes me nervous."

Fergus said, with a look in his eyes Jeannie had never seen there before, "Would you like your mother in here? I did tell you over the phone that you might prefer to have her with you."

Cecily said, "For that reason I sent her out. I imagine what you have to say to me is somewhat in the nature of personal business. For that same reason I fail to see why you've brought an audience."

Fergus's voice was quiet, yet it sent shivers up and down Jeannie's spine.

"I would remind you that Mr. Gillingham is our solicitor. His wife is here to support . . . my fiancée. She has no one else, apart from me."

Jeannie closed her eyes. Now it would come. Cecily would tell all. And she couldn't stop her. Mr. Gillingham would be shocked. He would say she had been appallingly foolish, there were right and proper ways, legal channels, for these things. There would be a courtcase... .

Cecily said, "How pathetic. An orphan."

Fergus said, "I want to know exactly how you . . . shall we say *persuaded* Jeannie to give me up?"

Cecily laughed. "Oh, that. Fergus, you're making a mountain out of a molehill. As you say, Jeannie has nobody much. She confided in me that you had blundered while she was in hospital. Just a quixotic impulse, I suppose. Some mistaken idea of chivalry. And now this engagement was embarrassing her. Actually I think Neville's return had something to do with it. With her wanting to end it, I mean."

Fergus said, "It hadn't. I've asked him. You hinted as much the night you came up to see me. I knew you were up to something. I'm waiting for you to tell me exactly how you made Jeannie give me up. It's no use your trying to get out of it. You remember writing to me, Cecily, warning me to watch Jeannie ... that she had put herself on the wrong side of the law. In some way you've twisted things to be able to threaten her with something. *What is it?*"

Cecily did not speak. Her face was ashen.

Till now she had evidently hoped that Jeannie would not give her away, out of her fear for the children. But Fergus was not going to be gainsaid.

Fergus waited, his arms folded.

Jeannie essayed speech, but Fergus waved her down. She turned to Mr. Gillingham, said, "Mr. Gillingham, perhaps I—"

He in turn waved her down. "My dear, let Fergus handle this in his own way."

Cecily recovered a little. "Fergus, may I ask why you're going into all this? Jeannie told me the truth about your sham engagement. A chivalrous impulse on your behalf, she said. Isn't this carrying chivalry a little too far?"

Fergus met her eyes squarely. "I don't blame you for thinking it merely chivalry, Cecily. After all, you traded on my sense of chivalry once, didn't you? But this time it isn't going to mess up my life . . . I'm not going to let Jeannie go. And, since she is going to be my wife, I shall have no secrets from her. She isn't going to go through life thinking that her husband and the father of her children was a drunken swine who served a gaol sentence. She's going to know the truth. She's going to know that it was you who was drunk. That I took you from that party because I knew that any moment you would begin to make a spectacle of yourself. That we quarrelled on the way home.

"If any of the fault was mine it was because I should have waited till you sobered up before telling you I was through. And you lost control of yourself, didn't you, Cecily? Grabbed the wheel and smashed into that other car.

"Later, in hospital, afraid you would be crippled for life, you begged me not to give you up. Begged me to take the blame. I felt sorry for you. .. wrecked by your own folly. More fool I. I beggared myself to put you on your feet again, let the engagement stand till you were cured. And, out of the blue, you married a wealthy old man ... to my great relief.

"But it was to your husband's lasting sorrow. He found out. . . someone told him I had paid for your surgical treatment, that you had gone away still wearing my ring. He never knew that you had caused the accident. He sent for me, and you found out. You came to his office where I was to see him. You were tired of an elderly husband, you hoped that he might divorce you...

you flung yourself into my arms as that door opened. You were mightily chagrined when it was . . . Jeannie.

"Owen offered me the money it had cost me to make you walk again, but I turned it down. I thought he was a fine man. I also thought I was more fortunate than he."

Fergus's voice was relentless. Jeannie was as still as a statue.

"No, I'm not chivalrous any longer, Cecily. Not when it could jeopardize Jeannie's happiness. It wasn't a chivalrous impulse that made me claim I was engaged to her. It was simply that I loved her, that we belonged. She made me believe in women again. And I won't have her happiness ruined by you. I've an idea Jeannie ran away from some situation in Auckland. Perhaps she was desperate for money to get away and borrowed some . . . unofficially. If so, I'm here to get her out of the mess. Now, for the last time, what have you over Jeannie?"

Cecily was almost beyond words, but she couldn't get her mind away from Fergus's revelations.

She moistened her lips. "Wh-what are you going to do about the accident?"

A grim smile touched Fergus's lips. "A typical reaction. Yourself first, foremost, and always! Nothing, my dear Cecily, if you behave yourself. If you keep away from Jeannie—and me—completely. But if ever I hear you trying to injure her in any way, even by malicious talk, I shall go to the police and seek to have the case reopened. Understand? The price was paid. I paid it. . . but Jeannie must never suffer. That's all."

Happiness, an almost frightening happiness, was breaking over Jeannie. There was only one fear left and she realized that now she must bring it into the open. With Fergus beside her she would fight it to the end ... and win. If he had been prepared to champion her even had she been a thief, then he would for this. So would Mr. Gillingham. She was no longer alone.

She said, hardly looking at him because she could not yet—quite—meet his eyes, "Fergus, I should have put my trust in you before. And in Mr. Gillingham. You see, I abducted the children from their legal guardian—their stepfather, Mr. Bertram

Skimmington, the pickle factory man. He was going to make Peter leave school and work in the factory. Cecily threatened she would let him know where we were if I didn't give you up. I couldn't risk it. And I thought you still ... I thought you were buying Lavender Hill for *her*. I didn't know you loved me." Her voice dropped to a thin thread of sound.

The sudden tenderness in Fergus's face almost broke her up.

She continued: "But—but you won't let him take the children, will you?"

Arthur Gillingham stepped forward, took Jeannie's hands. "My dear," he said, "what you must have suffered! The fear, the uncertainty. *And none of it was necessary*. Fergus sent me to Auckland on your behalf to make enquiries. If—as Mrs. Chalmers had suggested to him by letter—you had placed yourself on the wrong side of the law, Fergus was prepared to go to any lengths to extricate you. But I found that as far as anyone knew, you had only run away.

"Not that it might not have caused trouble. But your stepfather died the day you left. No, no, not from shock at what he had forced you to do ... He died not knowing you had gone. He died in his office from a heart attack during the beginning of enquiries into years of tax evasion. Steady now."

The dry-as-dust solicitor's arms were about Jeannie, his eyes were—yes—wet. Jeannie dropped her head against his shoulder for a moment, straightened up.

She looked at Cecily. "You knew my stepfather had died?" Though it was more a statement than a question.

There was something almost admirable about Cecily Chalmers at that moment, because she did not try to evade it. She said quite coolly, "Yes. I risked all for love ... and lost."

Jeannie said sorrowfully, pityingly, "You don't know what love means."

Fergus took her arm. "Now we can go," he said.

Being Jeannie she could not go quite like that. She turned back, said to Cecily, "Where is your mother? I think you ought to have someone of your own with you."

Cecily's control slipped. "She's—she's at Anderson's. I don't need her. and I don't" — fiercely—"need any magnanimous gestures from you." Sudden malice lit the topaz yellow eyes. Her lips twisted. "After all, *I'm sorry for you*."

It won't be exactly ideal, will it? You'll always have a doubt in your mind, wondering whether or not Fergus really loved you ... or your orchards. He's marrying you for a way of life. For the orchards he hoped would be *his* inheritance. Oh yes, he'll deny it, but you'll always wonder."

Colour sprang into Jeannie's cheeks. Any pity she might have felt was washed away by this slur on Fergus. She took a step forward, laughed, a confident laugh.

"There won't be anything to spoil our happiness, Cecily. I have the utmost confidence in Fergus. He's above that sort of scheming. Only someone as mercenary as you could think of such a thing. You're measuring him by your own pitifully low standards."

At that moment Mr. Gillingham cleared his throat.

"It so happens," he said, "that I have the complete answer to that one. When Miss Fraser was in hospital—"

Fergus caught his arm. "No, sir, not that. You mustn't—"

Mr. Gillingham freed his arm with some dignity. But a little smile softened the severity of his mouth.

"Fergus! I once saw you commit social suicide. But this time you're going to get full credit in your Jeannie's eyes, for your strength of character. There must be no more secrets from each other." He turned a little towards Jeannie. "When you were in hospital, my dear, and Fergus was clearing up preparatory to have the decorators in, he came across a long envelope in Mrs. Kelvington's handwriting, addressed to me. He sent it on, thinking it a business letter.

"It was a later will ... in which half the estate was left to Fergus, half to you. Jean Kelvington hoped some harmonious arrangement would result. I don't think even she could have dreamed how harmonious it would turn out, how ideal. I gave Fergus the will to read when he came in answer to my summons, the Saturday you left hospital.

"What he did then was completely unorthodox but very much in keeping with his character. He demanded that I suppress the will. I told him I could not. So, before I could stop him, he thrust the will into the drawing-room fire, holding it down with the toe of his shoe till it caught alight and was completely destroyed. You remember you noticed his shoe was scorched."

He smiled at Jeannie. "That, my dear, is the measure of his love for you."

The smile faded and the solicitor looked at Cecily Chalmers.

"And it's the answer to your last bid to spoil the happiness of these two people."

Cecily's face was a mask of hatred, of despair, of defeat.

Mollie Gillingham said briskly, "I shall ring your mother and ask her to come home. I shall stay till she arrives."

The little grey solicitor said, "I shall stay too. I want no garbled version of this to reach Mrs. Oliver, purely as a protective measure on behalf of my two clients."

Fergus said, "I'll stay too . . . I want to see it through. But I'm going to send Jeannie home by taxi. She's had enough."

Jeannie made no protest. She wanted a little time to herself to realize the glory of it, the wonder, the freedom . . .

Fergus took her out to the taxi, just a few yards.

He said, "I shall come as soon as I can, my love. Wait for me in the old orchard. Under the cherries, below Owl's Roost. No telephone to interrupt there, no people. I wish it might have been Piper's Hill . . . with a moon . . . but I shan't be able to wait for a moon to rise." He grinned. "You're going to be one female who can say her husband never proposed."

Jeannie found her voice. "If you think, Fergus MacGregor, that you're going to get away without proposing, you can think again. Why, Elizabeth had fourteen pages— all in black and white!"

He put her into the taxi, turned away.

Jeannie climbed the hill to Owl's Roost, sat on the seat Fergus had fashioned there while she was in hospital, out of the gnarled, apricot-coloured branches of the native tree fuchsia. It was so hard a wood, so enduring, the Maoris called it *ake-ake*—for ever and ever.

She gazed out over the burgeoning countryside, acres of shimmering blossom, pink and white like coconut ice . . . the green sward, the peacock-blue river cutting through its deep gorges. Their inheritance.

They would have so much to explain. So many mock reproaches, laughing recriminations . . . "I see now why you fired the pickles at the tree, my

love!" ... "I realize now, Fergus, why you wouldn't send a wire when Owen died—you wouldn't support Cecily in her hypocrisy of grief." . . . "Why you didn't bother contradicting that newspaper report." ... Fergus would say to her, "Haven't you any idea what you did to me when I told you I had bought Lavender Hill? It was my fool way of proposing, and you cut me off and handed back my ring. ..."

Up the hill came Fergus.

Jeannie rose from her seat, went down slowly to meet him, savouring every moment. The spring zephyr stirred the nut- brown curls from her forehead, billowed out the soft green folds of her dress.

Fergus saw her coming to him on what had once been a bare hillside. Now there bloomed amid the tussocky grass, violets, primroses, daffodils. *Behind* her footsteps as Elizabeth had once said, but it was for him now, in the lovely years ahead, to see that they bloomed before her.

He reached her.

As he caught her to him, over his shoulder Jeannie saw, far below, the school bus stop at the gates of Strathlachan, and disgorge two laughing children. Teresa and Peter. Safe, safe always.

THE END